Cover Missing

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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The Young Rough Rider's Aerial Voyage;

OR,

HARRY M. LANE.

THE STRANDED CIRCUS.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

CIRCUS DAY IN ROBEN.

"Step right up, gentlemen, and try your luck! Every number wins a prize!"

"Lemo——! Lemo——! Ice-cold lemonade! Two glasses for five cents!"

"Here's where you get your tickets for the side show! Ten cents, two nickels, a dime, a tenth part of a dollar, is all it costs to see the greatest collection of wonders and monstrosities ever gathered together under one tent! The only living wild man in captivity, the boneless wonder, the living skeleton, the jolly mermaid—all for ten cents! Don't miss the chance of your lifetime! The side show will be all out and over in plenty of time for the big show!"

Everywhere was bustle and confusion.

Everyone seemed to be shouting at once.

It was circus day in Roben, Kansas. In fact, it was the first circus day the little Western town had ever known.

For the past six weeks every inhabitant of the town and the residents of the surrounding cattle farms had been looking eagerly forward to this great day.

The flaring posters, picturing the impossible and thrilling performances of various trapeze artists, snake charmers, horseback riders and experts in other thrilling rôles had caused much comment. Very few men, women or children residing within fifty miles of Roben failed to visit the town this day.

They had begun to arrive long before daylight. Many of them arrived before the Fuller & Zinn Great Consolidated Circus and Menagerie arrived.

A large crowd had watched with unflagging interest the unloading of the mysterious, covered circus wagons and the animal cages and the magical erection of the big tents, three in number.

Everything had moved like clockwork, and now, after the parade was over and the side show and various candy, peanut and lemonade stands had begun business, the money which the populace had been faithfully saving for "circus day" began to flow into the coffers of the showmen.

Of course, the circus had brought all kinds of people

to town. There were honest, law-abiding citizens, and there were rascals and blacklegs of every description—desperadoes, gamblers and sharps.

Roben was noted as an unusually clean and peacful town for the West. It had good officers—able men.

Mayor Walter Hardy had anticipated the mob which would be attracted to the town by the circus, and had planned methods by which he hoped to keep order. He had advised his marshal to swear in a large number of deputies, and he had regarded it as a piece of good fortune that, the very day before the circus, there arrived in the town three men who were famed all over the West as fearless, bold champions of law and order.

These three visitors were Ted Strong, Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont.

Ted Strong, known far and wide as the young rough rider, was young—hardly more than a boy in years—but he was an athlete, strong and fearless—a veritable young giant in strength, although slight in build.

He had achieved fame as a ranch manager and mine expert, besides having on many occasions proved his right to the title of champion lasso thrower, horse breaker and dead shot, with rifle or revolver, of the West. He was the captain and organizer of a famous company of young men, known as the rough riders.

Bud Morgan was one of the prominent members of the company of rough riders. He was the oldest member of the company, and had spent practically all his life in the West, following for years the occupation of cowpuncher. He was a typical pioneer of the plains, wearing his yellow hair long, and assuming the careless, reckless swagger of the typical cowboy.

Ben Tremont was also an important member of the young rough rider's company. Ben was the strongest man of the combination. In fact, it has been often stated that in the whole country it would be hard to find Ben's match for strength and his knowledge of how to get the best results from his muscles.

The three rough riders had not come to Roben for the express purpose of seeing the circus. They had been in the vicinity on business with certain cattle raisers, and, being near, had planned to stay over one day on account of the show being in town.

Ted Strong had called upon Mayor Hardy, as the two were old friends, having known each other in the East, before either had thought of going West.

Hardy had at once begged the rough riders to act as special officers for circus day, and, after some hesitation, Ted had agreed that himself and friends would be ready to act in that capacity, should they see any need of it.

The mayor seemed greatly relieved in his mind when he had exacted this promise from Ted.

"You see, Ted," he said, "the men of Roben, representing the better element, have had a hard struggle to enforce the obeyance of the laws. There is a quarrelsome element here, which lacks little of being in the majority. It has been boasted that everything would be thrown wide open on circus day, and many of our regular citizens will rejoice to see the outsiders get the best of us. I am determined that the law shall not be trampled under foot while I am mayor, no matter what the cost. The reputation of our little town shall be kept up."

"Your pride in your little town's previous good record is very commendable, Walter," said Ted, "and I should dislike to see you disappointed. My companions and myself will certainly try to do our parts in keeping order."

"Thank you, Ted," was the reply. "I will see that you are well paid. I regard your attendance here as very fortunate at this time."

"Well, don't expect too much of us," said Ted, with a smile.

Ted and his two companions were up bright and early on the morning that the show came into town. They saw every detail of the work of unloading the trains until the side show and stands were ready for operation.

Then they mingled with the crowd around the stands and in front of the place where the side-show "barker" was calling out descriptions of the wonders to be seen in the tent. He was selling tickets almost as fast as he was talking.

With a word to his friends, Ted separated from them, and, buying a ticket, entered the side show.

He saw at once that the attractions were few and cheap. The show evidently relied upon their gorgeous banners and the loquaciousness of their outside "barker," rather than the merits of their side show, to coax the dimes from their patrons.

Just as Ted entered the side show, the man inside, whose duty it was to introduce and explain each freak, had just started to work.

Under his direction the crowd was gathered around a glass case, mounted on a hastily constructed platform. Inside the case was "the jolly, smiling mermaid"—only the mermaid was neither smiling nor jolly. Ted, at a glance, saw that the mermaid was of *papier-maché*, although the lecturer gave a detailed description of how the "little beauty, half fish and half human," had been captured in the Indian Ocean, after great difficulty and peril. He said the mermaid had been the only one of its species ever captured, and he told how it had died after being held in captivity, and explained the methods used to preserve the body for exhibiting purposes.

Of course, every word the man uttered was believed by many of the open-mouthed spectators.

From the fake mermaid the crowd was led to another platform, upon which rested a large cage, made of strong iron bars. In the cage was a being which was introduced to the sight-seers as the "Wild Man of Semboniea." As the lecturer told at length the thrilling story of the wild man's capture, the wild man went through terrible con-

tortions of body and facial muscles. Many of the crowd expressed their wonder at the sight, but Ted knew that after the show hours were over the "wild man" would shed his disguise, pack his own trunk, and mingle with his fellow showmen as their equal.

And so the lecturer passed from feature to feature. Not a genuine freak or monstrosity was evident in the whole side-show collection.

But, when the lecturer had made the rounds of what were purported to be freaks, he addressed the crowd as follows:

"Everyone is invited to remain in the tent as long as he wishes. Look over the wonders which I have introduced to you, and, if any of you care for a trifle more exciting amusement, I commend to you Prof. James Popp, who, I see, is now preparing to entertain you at the other end of the tent."

As the lecturer spoke, every eye was directed toward the end of the tent at which he pointed.

And, as he finished, without a break in the flow of language, the man designated as Prof. James Popp began speaking:

"Step right up, gentlemen. I have here a little game of fortune. It is a fair game, as you will attest when you have seen it played. Every number wins. Some numbers win big money, some small money. Each paddle costs you the insignificant sum of one dollar. You stand a chance to win fifty dollars or one hundred dollars. Who will be the first to buy?"

The man who had been introduced by the lecturer as Prof. James Popp was standing behind a rough table. Before him, spread out on the table, were forty or fifty wooden paddles. Each paddle had a number painted upon one side of it, and the paddles were so laid upon the table that the numbers were down—not in sight.

Back of the man was a large rack, filled with envelopes, each having a number upon it, supposed to correspond with some number on the paddles.

The envelopes were each supposed to contain a slip of paper on which was printed the figures of some certain sum of money, from twenty-five cents up to one hundred dollars.

The man wished to sell the paddles to customers at one dollar each, the purchaser to be given the amount designated in the envelope, the number of which was the same as that on the paddle.

Ted saw through the game instantly, and he spent his time watching the man who manipulated the game, who had been introduced to the crowd as Prof. James Popp.

Popp was a medium man in size, and slim of build. He was flashily dressed, wearing a bright red, fancy vest, light trousers and a Prince Albert coat. His linen was snowy-white, and a large diamond showed conspicuously in his fashionable neck scarf.

His hair was jet-black, and he wore long, carefully waxed mustaches and an imperial. His eyes, black and sharp, were continually moving. He talked continually, and his hands never for an instant were idle.

He was a typical circus fakir.

Ted knew that the man was a sharp, and he stopped to watch his methods. Ted had every reason to believe that there would soon be trouble brewing.

The sharper evidently looked upon his customers in the little, Western town as "easy suckers." He regarded the West as virgin territory for his "skin game."

There were several "cappers" in the crowd, and they were, of course, the first to invest in the paddles.

"Cappers" are individuals who work on the outside for men who run such games as the one here described. The man who is running the game employs the "cappers" to enter the game as customers, and he manages to always work it so that the "cappers" win big prizes. Lookers-on at the game, seeing the winnings of the "cappers," are often induced to invest their own money, which they invariably lose.

It was not long until Ted Strong had picked out every "capper" who was working for Prof. Popp.

His eagle eye saw the "cappers" slip the money they had won in the game to a certain individual, who later managed to get it into the hands of Prof. Popp again.

None of the "cappers" were well-dressed. They were very ordinarily attired. They would not attract much attention.

Ted was watching them all closely, and he saw that one of the "cappers"—a young man—seemed to be the favorite with the manipulator of the game. This fellow always won the one-hundred-dollar prizes.

Finally, after winning one hundred dollars twice in close succession, the young "capper" backed away from the table, to give some of the "suckers" a chance to get up, and, just at that moment, Ted saw a young man enter the crowd who seemed to be a perfect double of the young "capper."

They would have looked like twin brothers had they been dressed exactly alike.

Each wore the same kind of a hat, and, in the crowd, where only their faces and hats showed plainly, they could hardly have been told apart.

The newcomer seemed greatly interested in the game. He shoved eagerly to the front, and was soon facing the fakir.

In a moment he was holding out a silver dollar for a paddle.

Ted was watching the game with great interest now. He wished to see if Prof. Popp would mistake this stranger for his young "capper."

Hardly glancing at the youth with the dollar, the fakir took the money and handed the lad a paddle.

The next minute he was handing the youth one hundred dollars in bright, new bills.

The boy invested another dollar, and won the big prize again.

Ted now made his way through the crowd, and stood by the young man's side.

As the lad invested his third dollar, Ted saw Prof. Popp looking at the boy, with a puzzled expression upon his face.

At the same moment, the real "capper" came forward to invest, but Popp did not see the real "capper" until he had handed the third paddle to the stranger.

The fakir turned red in the face, and made a movement to exchange the paddle he had handed to the strange lad for another, and would have succeeded had not Ted Strong whispered in the lad's ear:

"Don't give up that paddle. It's the one that wins."

The boy insisted upon taking the advice of the young rough rider.

Popp scowled angrily toward the young rough rider, for he had heard the advice Ted had given.

The number painted upon the lad's paddle was "No. 901."

But, with a quick manipulation, the fakir turned the paddle upside down, and flippantly announced the number, as it appeared in a flash, to be "No. 106."

He was about to reach in the rack for the envelope numbered "106," and, at the same time, attempted to shove the paddle back in the pile.

But Ted was too quick for the man.

With one hand Ted grasped the paddle, still in the man's hand, and with his other hand Ted reached for his revolver.

There was a dark scowl upon the face of the angry circus sharp.

"Let go of my paddle instantly!" he hissed.

But, instead, the fakir let go his hold of the paddle and backed away.

He was looking into the barrel of Ted's revolver!

And beyond the revolver he saw the cool, determined countenance of the young rough rider.

"Give this boy the proper envelope—envelope No. 901!" was Ted's command.

Just for a second the fakir hesitated. Then, as he heard the trigger of Ted's weapon click, he reached up a trembling hand to the rack behind him and threw the desired envelope upon the table.

The slip was drawn forth, and upon the slip was printed the figures: "$100."

"Now, count out this boy's winnings, quickly!" said Ted.

The fakir hesitated. His face turned pale. At last he stammered: "I—can't—do—it! I haven't that much money in front of me!"

Ted turned toward the crowd, and asked: "Do you hear what he says, gentlemen?"

The men in the crowd had been quick to see that the fakir had been caught trying to swindle one of their number.

They were quick to resent the action, and their voices were now raised in angry exclamations:

"Shoot the cuss!"

"Get a rope, somebody—we'll lynch him!"

"Let's show him he can't play Kansas boys fer suckers!"

"Tar and feathers and a splintered rail for him! I'll carry one end of ther rail!"

"So will I!"

"And I!"

"Me, too!"

Every man in the crowd seemed anxious to get revenge on the fakir, whom Ted had unmasked as a villain.

It certainly looked as if Prof. Popp would soon find himself in the hands of an angry mob.

CHAPTER II.

TED STRONG'S NERVE.

The face of Prof. Popp, the fakir, grew ghastly pale with fear as he heard the angry exclamations from the crowd of Westerners.

He began to realize that the Kansas men were not, perhaps, such "easy suckers" as he had imagined before they got an inkling that he was endeavoring to cheat them.

He fully believed that he was soon to be lynched, or shot, or tarred and feathered.

In husky tones, he leaned toward Ted Strong, and begged: "For God's sake, save me, if you can! I'll promise to square up with the young fellow and quit the game!"

"Yes, I guess you will square up with him and quit the game, anyhow," replied Ted, dryly. Then Ted turned toward the angry crowd.

"Hold on, boys—just a minute!" he yelled. "Listen to what I have to say!"

"Hear! Hear! Listen to the lad!" A dozen voices shouted at once.

Aided by some of the cooler-headed men in the crowd, Ted managed to quiet the mob for a moment. Then he addressed them:

"I was the one who caught this man trying to cheat, wasn't I?"

"Yes, yes!" several answered.

"Then I ought to have some say as to what shall be done with him, hadn't I?"

"Sure thing!" was the answer from many.

"All right," replied Ted. "The first thing this man has to do is to hand over to this boy here the hundred dollars."

"But he says he hasn't got that amount," yelled some one in the crowd.

"Don't worry about that," said Ted. "He has it, and I know where it is."

Ted then turned toward the fakir. The young "capper" had drawn near his employer.

"Get that roll of money from your 'capper' there," commanded Ted, pointing at the young man, "and pay this youth."

Popp saw that his game was unmasked. He saw no chance to "hedge."

Out of the "capper's" pockets came the roll of money, which the young man had not had time to return to his employer.

One hundred dollars was soon counted out and placed in the hands of the boy who had held the lucky number.

Then Ted turned again to the crowd. He had watched the game closely, and there had not been many plays outside of those made by the "cappers." He knew, almost to a man, who had lost money. No one man had lost more than three or four dollars, as the game had not continued long enough.

"Those who have lost money in this game," said the young rough rider, "step forward and get it back."

Three or four men came to the front, and, at Ted's command, Popp paid them back the amounts each had lost.

The fakir had but a few dollars left. He was out exactly the three hundred dollars that had been won by the boy who so much resembled his "capper."

When all the losers had been reimbursed, Ted made a short speech to the crowd, telling them how the fakir's game was worked, and how he had spotted the "cappers." Then he added:

"Now, I suppose that many of you would like to see this fellow well punished, but I think this matter has gone far enough. As it stands, nobody has lost any money except the fakir himself. He has lost three hundred dollars, and will not dare reopen his game while the circus is here. We will drop the matter right here, and let the man go, with the advice not to show himself about the town while the circus remains here."

"We will not drop ther matter here—not by a durn sight!"

An uncouth, bewhiskered man had stepped to the front from the crowd, with the foregoing words, as soon as Ted had closed his remarks.

There was a determined expression on the man's face.

Ted looked the stranger squarely in the eyes, and replied:

"I said we would drop this matter right here. You say we will not. Why won't we?"

"Because Ollie Shack ain't ther guy ter see no sich ornery cuss as thet feller try ter work him an' his friends fer suckers an' then git away without at least a good threshing!"

"Thet's right, Ollie! We're with yer! We'll break ther cuss' head open!"

The man who gave his name as Shack evidently had friends in the crowd.

But that evident fact did not cause Ted Strong any uneasiness. At least, he showed no uneasiness. He appeared as cool and collected as ever. When he spoke, it was in his usual tone.

"I think everybody in this crowd heard me say that this man, Popp, would be allowed to go free. He has been punished sufficiently. No one except himself is out any money. Unless some one can show me a good reason for not allowing him to leave this tent unmolested, I shall not change my decision!"

"Huh, what do yer suppose we care fer yer decision?" asked the man who had called himself Shack, with a sneer.

"It makes no difference what you care about my decisions," was Ted's quick reply. "I am managing this little affair, and I propose to back up what I say!"

"Oh, yer do, eh?" asked Shack, sneeringly.

"You heard what I said! I don't think I stuttered!" replied Ted, coolly.

"Well, I don't agree with yer, an' neither does my friends," said Shack.

"Yer bets we don't! Ther young feller is too durn smart! Let's do 'em both up!"

Encouraged by the shouts of his friends, Shack started to pull his revolver, but he was not quick enough.

Before his hand had reached his side, Ted uttered a quick command.

Shack looked up, and saw that Ted had him covered with two shining Colt revolvers.

"Don't put a finger on your gun!" said Ted.

Then, without turning his head, he spoke to the fakir:

"Get out of this tent and hide somewhere as quickly as you know how!"

Prof. Popp, as he was known to the crowd, lost no time in obeying Ted's command.

He slunk away to the edge of the tent, lifted the canvas, and disappeared.

While the fakir was making his escape, Ted kept the crowd covered. His eye seemed to be resting on every face individually, and each of his guns seemed to be covering each individual. Not a hand was moved toward a weapon.

When the fakir had disappeared, Ted addressed the crowd:

"I want every man in this mob to get out of this tent as fast as he can move. I will count to 'twenty,' and, if there is one of you left in the tent when I reach that number, I will shoot him down like a dog! Get a quick move on, all of you! One—two—three——"

Before Ted had counted up to "ten" the tent was free of visitors.

When the last man was out of sight, Ted slipped to the rear end of the tent, lifted the canvas, and crawled through the opening.

To his surprise, instead of being out of doors, Ted found himself standing inside the large circus tent.

On every hand laborers were working, getting things in readiness for the afternoon's performance.

Several performers were standing about, dressed ready for the show when it should begin, and they were each engaged in directing the placing of his or her own particular apparatus.

In one of the rings, prepared for the equestrian work, the ringmaster was rehearsing one of the performers, or so it appeared to the young rough rider.

A large, sorrel circus horse was being driven about the ring, and upon its broad back, with a white, scared face, was a mite of a girl dressed in tights and a short, bespangled skirt.

The child could not have been over eight or nine years of age.

That the little girl was new in its present occupation, and deathly afraid, was easily seen.

The ringmaster's face wore a cruel, angry expression as the child repeatedly failed to rise from her knees to a standing position upon the horse's back at his command.

At last, with an extra crack of his long-lashed whip, the ringmaster rushed toward the side of the slowly galloping horse, and shook his finger at the girl menacingly.

"Get up on your feet, d—n you, or I'll whip you within an inch of your life!" he commanded.

Tremblingly, the girl tried to obey. She arose part way. Then her foot slipped, and, with a scream, she fell to the sawdust.

Ted's blood boiled with indignation. As soon as the girl had started to fall he sprang toward the ring.

But Ted did not reach the ring until the ringmaster had jumped toward his pupil. With a cruel jerk, the man pulled the little girl to the center of the ring, and began beating her cruelly with his whip.

"I guess you'll get all this nonsensical nervousness out of you by the time I get through with you, you little minx!" he was saying, as Ted came up noiselessly on the sawdust.

As the ringmaster raised his whip to deliver another stinging blow around the child's legs, he found the whip suddenly snatched from his hand.

At the same time that Ted had grasped the whip with one hand he had grasped the ringmaster's collar with the other.

And he whirled the man quickly about, facing him.

Without saying a word, Ted began treating the ringmaster to the same sort of punishment the latter had just been giving the girl.

And Ted spared no strength in plying the whip. He lashed the man until his cries of pain attracted the attention of the other showmen in the tent.

Soon there was quite a crowd near the ring, but no one offered to interfere with the young rough rider.

From occasional glances which Ted caught of the faces, he thought he saw looks of extreme satisfaction on several of them.

Finally, after giving the brutal ringmaster a severe thrashing, Ted threw the man from him with a powerful swing.

The ringmaster rolled over and over in the dust, and, as he got up, his face seemed to be distorted with passion.

He had pulled a gleaming knife from some part of his clothing, and, as he scrambled to his feet, he faced Ted, and exclaimed:

"I do not know who you are, and I don't care! I am going to kill you for this!"

As he spoke, he rushed toward Ted, with the hand which held the gleaming knife extended.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAD ELEPHANT.

Ted Strong, as he saw the angry ringmaster coming toward him with the gleaming knife, made no move whatever to avoid the rush of his assailant.

Neither did Ted reach for his revolver nor knife.

He did not fear his antagonist, although it was plainly to be seen that the ringmaster fully meant to accomplish his threat to kill the young rough rider if he could do so.

Several members of the crowd who were watching the combat uttered cries of alarm. But no one seemed to dare to offer any interference with the ringmaster.

Ted stood perfectly still and watched the man who was springing toward him. As the man drew near, and the knife was extended toward the breast of the young rough rider, Ted's left hand shot out and grabbed the wrist of the hand which held the knife.

Ted jerked the man forward, and at the same time doubled his right fist and drove it squarely between his enemy's eyes.

It was a powerful blow, and straight from the shoulder. The ringmaster's head fell back as if it had been hung on a hinge.

Ted shook the knife from the man's grasp and threw the body again to the ground.

The ringmaster made no immediate attempt to regain his feet.

Leaving the villain where he lay, at full length upon the ground, Ted turned his attention toward the girl whom the ringmaster had been beating.

"Is that man the father of this little girl?" asked Ted of a performer standing at the edge of the crowd.

The man addressed shook his head, and replied: "No; the little girl belongs to Sporty Jim, I believe."

"Who is Sporty Jim?" was Ted's next question.

"He works in the side show," was the answer.

"Is he known to the public as Prof. James Popp?" asked the young rough rider.

"Yes."

"Is the girl his own daughter?"

"I don't know," answered the performer. Just at that moment the little girl, who had listened to Ted's questions and the answers, spoke for herself.

"Sporty Jim isn't my father," she said. "My papa is good-looking. He is a good man. He never whips me. Sporty Jim and a lady made me go out riding with them one day, and they wouldn't never let me go home again. They won't even let me write a letter to mamma, so she won't worry about me. I want to go home. I don't like to ride horseback in the ring. I don't like these tights."

Ted listened eagerly to what the little girl was saying. As she finished, Ted took her kindly by the hand, and asked:

"What is the name of your papa, and what is the name of the town where he lives?"

Before the child had time to answer, a tall woman, dressed in a riding habit, came hurriedly through the crowd and snatched the child up in her arms.

"Poor, little dear!" she exclaimed. "Have you been frightened? What is the matter?"

Ted was in no manner deceived nor taken off his guard. He knew at once that the woman was acting a part, that her endearing expression toward the child was assumed. He knew it by the expressions on the faces of the spectators and by the look of astonishment and bewilderment on the face of the child.

He was about to make a remark to the woman who had picked up the little girl, when an exclamation of anger from some one in his rear caused him to turn around.

He found himself facing Sporty Jim.

Sporty Jim had drawn a revolver, and had the young rough rider covered. As Ted faced him, the fakir said:

"Young man, I think you have caused enough trouble around here to-day without butting into any more affairs that do not concern you! You had better take a walk. Outsiders have no business in this tent until the show is ready to commence."

What Ted's answer might have been no one ever knew, for at that moment a dozen men came rushing into the big tent from an adjoining one—the menagerie tent.

They were shouting alarming warnings as they came:

"Run for your lives!"

"Rodney is loose!"

"The big elephant has gone mad!"

Then, from the menagerie came the sounds of loud, angry trumpetings. The gathering of people in the big tent knew that their lives were, indeed, in danger, for many of them had before experienced the panic caused by an enraged elephant while loose.

The performers and workmen fled in every direction.

Ted's first thought was for the safety of the little girl whom he had saved from the fury of the ringmaster.

He saw the woman who had seized the child hurrying away toward the opposite side of the tent. She still held the child, and had nearly reached a point of safety.

Then Ted looked for the form of the ringmaster. Ted supposed that the stunned man was still lying where he had fallen. But no sight did the young rough rider catch of the brute, and he concluded the man had recovered and gone away.

Those who had been in the tent were rapidly getting out of danger, and, as the enraged elephant came trumpeting into the tent, Ted saw that he had just about time to get to the side of the tent and creep under the canvas to safety.

He turned to make his escape, but, at that minute, he saw one of the running women performers stumble and fall to the ground.

She was right in the path of the enraged brute. The elephant had seen the woman fall, and was making directly toward her.

Without a thought of personal danger, the young rough rider sprang toward the fallen woman.

With two bounds he was beside her, and had taken her up in his arms.

There was still time to escape, he thought, as he picked her up; but his heart sank as he heard her exclaim:

"My ankle is broken! I cannot stand!"

The woman was not small. Her weight was considerably more than that of the average woman.

But, with the woman in his arms, Ted attempted to escape.

He had nearly gained the edge of the tent before the elephant reached him.

He felt the trunk of the huge beast encircle his waist just as he was about to fall to his knees to crawl under the canvas.

Then he dropped the girl, and saw her dragged into the open air by friends outside.

Hands also were extended toward Ted, but he could not reach them.

He was in the power of the infuriated elephant.

It seemed for a minute that the powerful grip of the elephant's trunk about his waist would crush every bone in his body.

For a moment the angry beast waved the form of the young rough rider high in the air. Then Ted was brought close to earth again.

The next second he felt himself again rising.

With a mighty swing, the elephant threw Ted's body sailing high toward the roof of the tent!

CHAPTER IV.

TWO NARROW ESCAPES.

The showmen and others who had escaped from the large circus tent before the infuriated elephant had arrived from the menagerie tent soon spread the news of the cause of the disturbance, and there was a panic outside of the tent.

People listened in open-mouthed horror to the news of how the elephant had broken his chains. Many hurried from the grounds in fear.

Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont were among the first of the outsiders to fully comprehend what all the excitement was about. They looked through the crowd, with the hope of catching sight of their young leader, but Ted was nowhere in sight.

They stood near the side of the tent when the woman performer whom Ted had rescued was pulled from under the canvas.

The woman was greatly scared and excited, but Bud heard her exclaim:

"Quick, some one, help the young man who rescued me! He is inside, and the elephant grabbed him with its trunk just as he got me to safety!"

A suspicion entered the mind of Bud Morgan.

"Who were the young man, miss?" he asked.

The woman gazed up at Bud as he asked the question. She looked surprised.

"I don't know his name. I never saw him until a few minutes ago. He had brown hair and brown eyes and a very handsome face. He was dressed exactly like you are dressed."

The three rough riders were clad, as usual, in their brown, khaki-cloth suits, cut military style, which had been adopted as the uniform of the young rough riders.

From the girl's hasty answer, Bud was certain that it was Ted who was in danger.

He jumped quickly toward the tent, drawing his revolver as he went.

He lifted the canvas, and peeped into the tent.

His eyes rested immediately upon the elephant, but he caught no glimpse of Ted.

The elephant was tearing about the tent, pulling up wooden stakes to which tent ropes were tied.

As Bud watched him, the angry beast stopped in front of one of the two big center poles. He wrapped his trunk about the pole and began to pull upon it.

The pole wavered, and Bud Morgan knew that within a minute the big tent would come tumbling down to earth.

Bud gave a warning cry, and the few spectators who were left ran back to a safe distance.

They were just in time to escape being buried under the big canvas.

The elephant had pulled down the center pole, and the tent tumbled down in a big pile.

As the smothering mass fell about the huge beast, twenty or thirty showmen sprang forward to capture the elephant. They thought they could get him before he could tear himself loose from the heavy canvas.

But the tough material of which the tent was made seemed like frail cheese cloth to the elephant.

With angry snorts, he ripped it into shreds with his tusks, and was soon standing in plain sight of his enemies.

For one instant he stood blinking angrily at his human foes and trumpeting loudly. Then he charged directly toward the crowd.

There was a wild scrambling to get away. Every person seemed to have soon found a safe hiding place, for presently the elephant stopped. His foes were all out of sight.

For only a moment the huge beast stopped, and then he continued his mad charge. He first went to the red-and-green ticket wagon, and within two minutes had made a complete wreck of it.

Then he looked up and about him.

He saw a girl on horseback galloping toward the show grounds.

The girl was evidently some one who had not heard the report of a mad elephant being loose.

It was quite evident the girl did not see the animal immediately.

But in a second she became aware of his presence, for she saw the monster charging directly toward her and her horse.

A small grove of trees bordered the circus grounds, on the side from which the girl was approaching.

As the girl's horse caught sight of the strange animal coming toward it, it reared and plunged in affright. The girl was quickly unseated. She was thrown to the ground directly in the path of the mad elephant.

Strong men who were witnessing the scene grew faint.

It seemed absolutely impossible that the girl could escape a terrible death.

Several of the showmen, among them two who originally had charge of the big beast, ran after the elephant shouting to it and vainly calling for it to stop.

The animal was now within a rod of the girl.

It seemed certain that she must perish when, suddenly, there sprang from the bushes in the edge of the woods, right by the side of the animal, the lithe form of Ted Strong, the young rough rider.

Ted held in his hands his lasso, coiled and looped, ready to throw.

As the elephant passed by him he threw his lasso, aiming for the animal's uplifted trunk.

When Ted saw the success of his throw he jumped quickly back and wound the loose end of the rope several times around the trunk of a large tree.

Ted had not expected to stop the elephant. The most

he expected was to check it momentarily, just long enough to give the girl a chance to escape from the spot.

He was entirely successful, for, as the lasso suddenly brought the elephant up with a jerk, the big beast fell broadside to the ground.

As the elephant fell, the lasso snapped in two.

But the girl was saved.

Before the elephant could rise his keepers were upon him and they speedily had the animal captured and in chains.

The excitement was over and, now that the animal was once more under control, spectators began flocking from all directions.

Bud Morgan had seen the daring act of the young rough rider and was the first to approach him, Ben Tremont being close behind.

"Glorious centipedes, Ted," exclaimed Bud, "we sartin thought yer was done fer! How'd yer escape when ther elephant grabbed yer in ther tent?"

"I certainly did have a narrow escape," replied the young rough rider, "but my usual good luck was with me. The animal threw me up in the air and right close to a trapeze which had been hung in the top of the tent. From the trapeze I managed to climb to the hole in the canvas, where one of the center poles passed through. I climbed out onto the roof of the canvas and then slid to the ground just before the tent went down. I hurried right to the woods to get my lariat. You know we left the horses tied in the woods?"

"Well, by gum, thet takes ther cake," exclaimed Bud.

"But what have you two been doing since I left you?" asked Ted. "Have you had any excitement?"

"Not a bit," was Bud's response. "We were jest planning ter take a ride in ther balloon when this 'ere elephant begin ter cut up."

"Take a ride in a balloon?" queried Ted, in surprise.

Bud then explained that on the other side of the show grounds a balloon had been inflated and was used in giving passengers short ascensions. It was connected with terra firma by a rope and windlass. The balloon was allowed to go up a certain distance and was then pulled down to the ground again with the windlass. Bud had been watching the ascensions with great interest and had resolved to take a trip, himself.

He had tried to persuade Ben Tremont to go with him, but the big rough rider had declined. Now Bud broached the proposition to Ted. He wanted Ted to go with him.

"I don't think I care to take the trip," said Ted, "but I'll go around to where the balloon is and watch you go up."

Just as Ted and Bud started away, one of the cattle men, with whom the rough riders had been doing business several days before, came up and engaged Ben Tremont in conversation.

Bud was impatient to make his ascension and so Ted and himself went on, leaving Ben to follow later.

Had Ted but known it, he was shortly to experience one of the most startling adventures of his life.

CHAPTER V.

UP IN THE BALLOON.

"All aboard for the next trip! A ride to the clouds and back for only ten cents!"

The big balloon was just being pulled back to earth when Ted and Bud arrived near the scene.

Anxious to secure a seat in the big passenger basket, Bud rushed forward, handed the man in charge a silver dime and climbed in.

Ted lagged behind.

Just before reaching the balloon the rough riders passed the entrance to the side show and, looking in, Ted caught sight of the tall woman who had grabbed up the little girl whom he had rescued from the cruel ringmaster.

Ted fully believed that the child had been kidnaped and he had decided to try to rescue her if such proved to be the case.

The woman was now holding the child by the hand.

The young rough rider determined to talk with the woman while he seemed to have such a good opportunity.

But he had not taken two steps toward the tent when he heard an exclamation behind him:

"There he is, boys! Grab him quick and run him inside! Don't hesitate to kill him if he shows fight!"

Ted glanced quickly around and was surprised to find that he was the object of the remarks.

Coming toward him, with weapon in hand, was the man known as Sporty Jim. Behind Sporty Jim were five or six rough-looking men, each of whom held in his hand either a gleaming knife or revolver.

They were in their shirt sleeves and were evidently employed about the circus as "canvas stretchers" or "roustabouts."

That they had been employed by Sporty Jim for the express purpose of "doing up" the young rough rider there seemed no doubt.

They were but a few yards away.

Ted, as he saw them coming, felt instinctively for his revolvers.

But his revolvers were gone. They had evidently dropped from their resting places while Ted was being tossed in the air by the mad elephant.

He thought quickly for a plan of procedure. He might put up a fight with his enemies, but the chances seemed greatly against him. They were all armed, while he was without any weapons except his hunting knife.

Then a thought suddenly struck him.

The balloon was about to go up. Bud was the only passenger. He would take the trip with Bud, then, when the balloon returned to earth he and Bud together could repulse the mob.

The man who had control of the balloon was loosening the ropes which held it close to earth.

Ted did not hesitate an instant.

As his enemies, led by Sporty Jim, sprang toward him with their weapons in their hands, Ted jumped toward the basket.

The balloon was now rising. It sprang in the air like a frightened bird.

Ted could not quite reach the edge of the basket, but his fingers caught hold of a long rope which dangled from the basket. It was one of the ropes used in anchoring the balloon to the earth when there were no passengers.

Ted's fingers closed tightly around the rope and he found himself being swung into the air suspended from the basket by the swinging rope.

As Sporty Jim saw his enemy about to escape him he gave a sharp order to his followers and one of the men leveled a revolver toward the swinging form of the young rough rider.

Bud Morgan, leaning over the edge of the basket, saw the move made by the man, and, before the fellow could fire, Bud threw from the basket a bag of sand, which had been placed in the basket for ballast, directly in the villain's face.

Sporty Jim, seeing his plans frustrated, sprang toward the rope which held the balloon connected with the windlass, and, before the man in charge could interfere, severed the rope with one slash of his knife.

Relieved of all restraining forces the big balloon now shot quickly toward the clouds.

The cries of the spectators soon called the attention of everyone on the circus grounds to the thrilling sight.

They could see Bud Morgan leaning over the edge of the large basket, while below him, swinging around and around, dangled the form of the young rough rider, connected to the balloon seemingly by only a little thread.

Upward and upward rose the balloon until it appeared but a speck in the sky.

At first it rose almost straight up, then, seeming to strike a current of moving air, it drifted off toward the east.

The crowd watched the balloon intently until it finally disappeared from sight.

Ben Tremont had seen the startling ascension of his two friends, and, of course, was greatly alarmed.

He rushed to the place from where the balloon had started and, from spectators who had seen the attempted attack upon the young rough rider, learned particulars.

Then he started to search for Sporty Jim. Of course Ben had not seen the man, but he was given an accurate description of him.

But Ben's search was unsuccessful.

Sporty Jim had disappeared.

Then Ben stopped to consider what course would be best to pursue.

He hunted up the man who had had charge of the balloon. That man also proved to be the owner of the big gas bag.

And he seemed a great deal more worried, Ben thought, about the probable loss of or damage to his balloon than about what might happen to the two passengers.

In answer to Ben's inquiries the man said that the balloon would eventually lose its gas and settle to the earth. He did not think the two passengers were in any great danger.

"But they will probably be carried a good many miles away, don't you suppose?" asked Ben.

"No tellin' how far," replied the man, sadly.

After this interview, Ben felt greatly grieved in mind concerning the safety of his friends. He resolved to stay right in Roben and continue his duties about the circus grounds until he had heard from the young rough rider. He had no doubt Ted would immediately send him word as soon as he had landed somewhere and could get to a telegraph office.

But Ben was not to be allowed to be lonesome. He soon found excitement enough to keep his mind from worrying about his two friends.

CHAPTER VI.

BEN TREMONT TRAPPED.

"Young man, you'll oblige me by handing me that revolver."

It was Ben Tremont who spoke and his remark was addressed to one of the showmen.

Ben was watching the laborers erect the big tent which had been razed by the mad elephant in pulling down the center pole.

He had seen one of the men pick up a revolver which Ben recognized immediately as the property of the young rough rider, Ted Strong.

Ben had not known that Ted had lost his revolver until he saw it in the showman's hand, but he knew he could not be mistaken in the weapon.

Ted's revolvers were made from a peculiar pattern, a design of his own. They were made to his own order and the handle grips fitted his hands perfectly.

The showman had been about to thrust the revolver in his pocket when Ben spoke.

"Why should I hand ther shootin' iron ter you?" asked the showman, impudently.

"The revolver belongs to a friend of mine. He must

have dropped it in here during the stampede caused by the elephant," replied Ben. "If you will look at the grip you will see my friend's initials engraved upon it. The initials are 'T. S.'"

Without taking the pains to see whether or not Ben's statement was true, the showman coolly placed the revolver in his pocket and started to walk away.

"Here, you," called Ben, "do you intend to go away with that revolver?"

"If it belongs ter yer friend let him come and get it himself," said the showman, without turning his head.

"Stop where you are!"

Ben's blood was up. The man's actions had made him angry.

He gave the command in a sharp, ringing tone and the man halted and turned slowly around.

He found himself covered by Ben's revolver. His face turned pale. Evidently he had not expected the rough rider to resort to these tactics.

He knew now that Ben was not to be trifled with.

"Yer got ther drop," he sullenly murmured and, without waiting for another command from Ben, he approached the rough rider and handed Ted's revolver toward him.

As the man approached, Ben lowered his own weapon and put out his free hand to accept the revolver held out by the showman.

As Ben stretched out his hand to take the weapon the man laid Ted's revolver in it and, without a sign of warning, suddenly drew back his right arm, clinched his fist and drove it squarely into the face of the rough rider.

The blow came so quickly and so unexpectedly that Ben had no time to dodge. For once in his life Ben Tremont had been caught napping.

It was a heavy blow, proving that the young man had strong muscles and knew how to control them.

Had Ben been a smaller man the blow would have probably lifted him off his feet and sent him sprawling to the ground.

As it was, Ben was staggered for an instant and his eyes were momentarily blinded.

Before he could recover he saw his assailant running rapidly away.

Ben was not the man to let such an attack go without his antagonist being properly punished.

He slipped the revolvers into his belt and started in quick pursuit of the showman.

Across the tent ran pursued and pursuer, and Ben saw the man run quickly into a canvased corridor leading to another tent, which Ben rightly guessed was the dressing tent for the performers.

Into the dressing tent after the man who had struck him dashed Ben and he arrived just in time to see the person he was pursuing slip into an apartment, which had been curtained off.

Throwing aside the curtain Ben continued on into the apartment. Then he stopped very suddenly.

The man had disappeared. Evidently he had lifted up the canvas at the edge of the tent and slipped outside. By mingling with the crowd Ben knew he might spend considerable time in searching for his man without finding him. He resolved to give up the pursuit for the present. He would keep an eye open for the fellow and when he saw him would give him a well-deserved thrashing.

Ben was about to back out of the dressing room when he heard a woman's voice from an adjoining apartment. She uttered a sentence which caught his instant attention:

"There seems no more use of worrying now that the young man has been carried away in the balloon, Jim."

"I can't help but worry. He must suspect that the girl was kidnaped. She told him as much herself. I wish the cuss had been killed by Rodney when he was loose. He seems to have as many lives as a cat."

The woman was answered by a man's voice. The woman spoke again:

"But how can he harm us now? The balloon will probably carry him many miles away from here. He cannot return before we get away. It is not likely he will follow us. And, besides, there is a probability that he may be killed during his aërial voyage."

"Little likelihood of that," replied the man. "His life seems to be charmed. Besides, he is not the man to give up following us if he thinks that girl has been kidnaped. He would follow us to the end of the earth."

"You must know him better than I supposed," said the woman.

"I have learned who he is."

"What is his name?"

"His name is Ted Strong, better known in the West as the young rough rider."

Ben heard the woman give a gasp of astonishment. It was plainly seen that both the man and the woman were well acquainted with the reputation of Ted Strong as a champion of the weak, a fighter for the rights of his fellow beings who were unable to help themselves.

Just at that moment Ben heard footsteps approaching. They seemed to be approaching the apartment into which he had followed the fleeing showman.

Ben did not wish to retreat until he had heard more of the conversation between the man and the woman in the adjoining apartment. He felt it to be his duty to listen. He already knew that the man and woman feared that Ted Strong would interfere in some manner with their plans. The interests of his friend seemed in some way involved in the case. Ben resolved to stand his ground if possible. He cast his eyes about the small apartment in search of some place to hide.

Along one side of the curtained apartment were hung

several circus costumes and in one corner stood a large trunk. The lid of the trunk was thrown back and Ben saw that the trunk was empty.

The footsteps were approaching rapidly.

Ben quickly resolved to hide in the trunk. He thought perhaps the newcomer would remain but a moment in the apartment.

No sooner had Ben conceived the idea of hiding in the big trunk than he put it into execution. He jumped quickly into the trunk and pulled down the lid.

Ben had been none too quick, for he had hardly settled in his uncomfortable position when the curtains parted and a woman entered the apartment.

Ben's quick ear heard her rapidly sorting out some of the costumes hanging upon the wall of the tent and then he heard the woman leaving the apartment again.

He deemed it safe to raise the lid of the trunk so that he could more distinctly hear the conversation between the man and woman in the adjoining apartment should it be continued.

But no sound of voices now reached his ear.

He was beginning to conclude that his remaining in the trunk was useless. He shoved the lid up higher with the intention of getting out of the trunk when, suddenly and without any warning sound, the curtains of the apartment were brushed aside and there appeared in the opening the evil face of Sporty Jim.

Ben had not previously seen the man, but he knew Sporty Jim instantly because of the description that had been given him of the circus fakir.

Ben's position in the trunk was a cramped one. He could not get out easily.

Sporty Jim saw the rough rider as quickly as he had been seen by Ben.

Sporty Jim was undoubtedly astonished to see the man in the trunk. Ben's presence was something he had not expected.

But the fakir noted the uniform worn by the rough rider—the khaki suit—and quickly surmised that Ben was a member of Ted Strong's company. The conversation he had just been having in the adjoining apartment with the woman concerning the little, kidnapped girl flashed through his mind.

He had no doubt but that Ben had heard what had been said.

Sporty Jim acted quickly.

Before Ben could make a move to get out of the trunk the fakir jumped forward and closed the lid.

The trunk had a spring lock and, as the bolt shot into place, Ben knew instantly that he was a prisoner—that he had unwittingly placed himself in the power of Ted Strong's enemy.

CHAPTER VII.

THE AERIAL VOYAGE.

"Kin yer hang on, Ted?"

The question had been asked by Bud Morgan as he leaned over the side of the big passenger basket of the balloon.

The balloon was rapidly rising and Ted Strong was clinging desperately to the small rope which hung below it.

The rope was too small to get a good purchase upon and had worn smooth and slippery from much use. It was with great difficulty that Ted managed to keep his hold. To climb the rope seemed exceedingly hazardous.

But Ted bravely answered Bud's question in the affirmative.

Bud Morgan reached over the side of the basket and endeavored to pull the young rough rider toward him, but so much weight on the one side tipped the basket until Bud was in great danger of falling out.

It was quickly seen that such a course would not do.

Then, as Bud leaned out, he heard Ted giving him some directions.

He listened carefully to what the young rough rider said and then went over to the opposite side of the basket and began hauling in the remnant of the rope cable which Sporty Jim had cut in two.

About fifty feet of the rope still hung from the balloon.

When he had hauled this in Bud made a noose at the end and slowly dropped it down and over the head of his young leader.

By momentarily shifting his arms, one at a time, the noose was finally looped about Ted's body under his arm pits.

Then Bud took up the slack and made the rope fast at his end.

Ted was now able to let go with his hands and give his arms a rest after the dreadful strain.

For several minutes he made no other move to gain the basket.

He looked below at the rapidly disappearing landscape.

The circus tents seemed now but little, white dots far below.

The balloon did not seem to be rising. Rather the earth itself seemed to be slipping away.

But, as soon as Ted's arms seemed rested and he felt himself fit for another strain, he grasped the small rope in his hands and began climbing toward the basket.

Bud aided Ted by constantly taking in the slack of the noosed rope, thus dividing Ted's weight equally on each side of the basket.

Little by little and with frequent pauses for rest, Ted climbed to the basket, but it was found that when he essayed to grasp the rim and climb into the basket it again tipped dangerously.

Ted's weight was greater than that of Bud Morgan.

Bud Morgan's quick wit alleviated this difficulty shortly, however. There remained in the basket several bags of the ballasting sand, and to the small rope Bud tied one of these sacks and lowered it over the opposite side of the basket.

The sand easily made up the difference in the weights and Ted soon climbed into the basket beside Bud.

As Ted climbed into the basket, he noticed that Bud Morgan's teeth were chattering as if with a chill.

"Cold, Bud?" he asked.

"Freezin' ter death!" replied Morgan. "Ain't you cold, too?"

Ted had not felt the sudden change in the temperature because his exertions in climbing up to and into the basket had kept him warm, but, shortly, he, too, felt the cold.

He looked over the side of the basket toward the earth.

No sign of the earth was visible.

They were above the clouds, drifting they knew not whither! They had even lost all track of direction or distance!

"Say, Ted, don't yer know nothing about balloons? They ought ter be some way ter make this 'ere bag of gas drop down, eh?" asked Bud.

"All I know is what I have read," replied Ted, "but this is a gas balloon and I think they usually have a valve near the top somewhere to let out the gas by degrees. The escaping gas makes the balloon sink. Let's see, a cord, I think, usually hangs into the basket from the valve. There is a cord and it probably connects with the valve in the top of this balloon."

Ted pointed to a small rope which was looped in the network just above his head and in reach, from the basket, of an ordinary man standing up.

"Shall I give it a pull?" asked Ted, as he grasped the rope.

Bud Morgan's face turned pale.

"Do yer know what ther effect will be?" he asked.

"No," replied Ted, "it will be entirely an experiment. The balloon may collapse for all I know."

"I'd like ter go toward old Mother Earth," said Bud, "but, jumpin' mastodons, I ain't anxious ter go too durn fast."

"But we are still rising," said Ted, "the air is now getting pretty light. Don't you notice any difficulty in breathing?"

"Yes," responded Bud, "but I didn't know what made it. Ain't they no air up above here?"

Ted did not smile at Bud Morgan's ignorance. Instead he patiently explained to his friend about the strata of air encircling the sphere which we call earth, and how it gradually diminishes the further and further away from the earth one travels.

"By gosh, thet's something I never knew afore," exclaimed Bud, "but I've noticed thet when one climbs up ter ther peaks of some of ther high mountains in ther Rockies thet breathin' sometimes gets durn hard."

"Well, then, you see what we are up against. We've got to keep this balloon from going much higher," said Ted. "I believe I'll give this rope a jerk, as an experiment, anyway."

"You know a durn sight better what ter do than me," said Bud. "Go ahead. If we drop too durn fast you will get there first, fer you're ther heaviest."

Bud's dry humor, even in the present dangerous predicament, caused Ted to smile, and before he pulled the rope he enlightened Bud upon another point.

"If you fell from here to the earth, Bud," he said, "you would be dead long before you struck the ground."

"What?" exclaimed Bud, surprised. "Wouldn't ther sudden stop I got when I bumped up against ther world kill me?"

"No," was Ted's reply. "You would die in the air. The air would leave your lungs and you could never draw the second breath."

Bud did not reply. His eyes were directed upon the movements of Ted as the young rough rider started to pull the rope. Breathlessly the two waited to note the effect of the experiment.

Ted stood upon his feet in the swaying basket and gave the cord a strong pull.

Instantly there was a hissing sound, caused by the escaping gas, and the balloon moved violently from side to side. It seemed for a moment that the large silken bag was about to turn directly over and start top first earthward.

Ted let go of the cord, but the hissing sound continued, although not so loudly.

The balloon straightened up and it was immediately noticed that they were rapidly sinking.

Within a few moments they passed below the clouds through which they had risen, and a little later they caught a welcome sight of the earth again.

As he saw the earth, a happy exclamation was uttered by Bud, but Ted said nothing.

There was a grave expression upon the face of the young rough rider when Bud looked up at him.

"What's ther trouble?" asked Bud. "Ain't we going down fast enough ter suit yer, Ted?"

"Too fast," answered Ted, gravely.

"What's thet?"

"I say we are descending too fast to suit me," answered Ted, again. "If we strike the earth at the rate we are going, it is very likely to be all up with us. At any rate, we would get an awful bump."

"Let's slow her down then," responded Bud.

"How?" asked Ted.

"Durned if I know," was Morgan's answer.

"Well, there is one thing we can do," said Ted, "and

that is to throw out these sand bags. They will certainly help some."

One by one four sand bags were lifted over the side of the basket and dropped below.

The effect was immediate. The balloon ceased to lower so rapidly. In fact, as the fourth bag was thrown out, the silken bag began to ascend again, but not for long.

Two sand bags remained.

In a short time it was seen that the balloon began descending slowly again.

It descended for several minutes and then Ted noticed that its rate of descent was rapidly increasing again.

The hissing noise at the top of the balloon still continued. It was plain that the valve had refused to entirely close when Ted had loosened his hold upon the rope which controlled it.

Ted and Bud threw out one of the remaining bags of sand.

This again checked the downward progress of the balloon, but now they had struck a strata of moving air and were being carried along in a parallel direction with the surface of the earth at a rapid gait.

They seemed to be driven by a fierce gale of wind. It was with difficulty that they kept their sombreros on their heads.

For several hours it seemed that they neither ascended nor descended, and darkness began to set in.

On and on they drifted.

It was a voyage that neither of the rough riders will ever forget.

As it grew darker and darker they seemed to be very slowly descending. Here and there in the darkness below they saw lights appearing one by one. Several times in their swift journey they saw groups of lights which they knew to be the electric street lights of some of the larger towns.

Then it began to rain—not a hard downpour, but a misty, drizzly shower. In a short time our heroes were drenched to the skin and began to suffer from the cold.

Until long past midnight their perilous journey continued. They had been descending, but very slowly.

Suddenly from out of the darkness the tiny lights of a distant town appeared.

They were drifting directly toward those lights.

They seemed to be now not more than three or four hundred feet above the earth and Ted began to hope that their eventual descent to earth would not be far from the edge of the large town.

The gas did not seem to be escaping so fast now.

Perhaps it would be a good and safe plan to try and let the gas out a trifle faster, Ted thought.

He accordingly stood up and grasped the cord which controlled the valve again.

They were now very close to the edge of the town. In three minutes more they would be right above the residence section.

Ted gave the rope a hard, strong pull.

The next second the whole top of the balloon seemed to collapse!

There was a sudden report as if from the discharge of a rifle.

Ted looked quickly above and the sight he saw nearly froze the blood in his veins.

The silken, gas-filled bag above him had split, seemingly from end to end!

They were possibly two hundred feet above the earth. A fall to the ground would kill them both instantly.

They began to descend with rocket-like speed! It seemed to the two rough riders that their breath was being torn from their lungs!

Then, suddenly, when they had given up all hopes of reaching earth alive, their progress was to a considerable extent checked.

They were still descending, faster than might have been hoped, but Ted had a chance to look above him again.

In the rapid descent the air had been forced into the big rent in the side of the balloon and had checked its progress.

They were now dropping toward earth very much as if landing with a parachute—only much faster.

As they came close to the ground Ted gave a quick direction to his companion:

"Jump from the basket before it strikes the ground, Bud, and get out of the way of the falling balloon!"

Bud heeded this advice and a minute later the two rough riders were standing a short distance from the wrecked balloon commenting upon their narrow escape.

They had had a perilous experience, but now they were no worse off than before they had started upon their unpremeditated aërial voyage.

"What'll we do with ther balloon?" asked Bud, finally.

"We'll leave it here for the present until we find what town this is and how far we are from Roben. Then we'll have it crated and sent on to its owner, who will probably remain with the circus."

Ted and Bud had moved away from the spot where the wrecked balloon had rested, and were approaching a street which they deemed led toward the heart of the city, when they were suddenly accosted from the darkness by three large men.

"Halt!"

At first Ted had a mind to put up a fight, thinking himself and Bud had been accosted by footpads or highwaymen, but before he had an opportunity to make a move in self-defense one of the three men suddenly flashed a dark lantern in his face.

The light from the lantern gave Ted a glimpse of a blue coat and a large, silver star.

"Don't resist, Bud," exclaimed Ted to his impetuous partner, "it's all right; these men are officers."

As Ted made the foregoing statement, himself and Bud were seized by the officers, for such they proved to be.

One of the policemen started to place handcuffs upon Ted's wrists, but Ted pulled his hand quickly away from the officer's grasp.

"Don't try to handcuff me, officer," exclaimed Ted. "I am willing to submit to the arrest, because I have nothing to fear. You have made some mistake in arresting us, but that can be easily explained later. You need not put the 'darbies' on either of us, however."

The officer flashed the light from the lantern once more in Ted's face.

"He don't look like a villain," he was heard to remark to his brother officers.

"Are you a resident of this city?" he then asked, turning to Ted.

"No," replied Ted, "and I don't even know the name of the town."

"And your friend?"

"He is as ignorant as myself."

"What are you two fellows doing in this part of the town at this hour of the night?"

"We just arrived in a balloon and were starting for the business section of the town. If you don't care to take my word for it you can see the balloon by walking back there a few rods."

One of the officers acted on Ted's suggestion and, returning shortly, confirmed Ted's statement about the balloon being in evidence.

The officers held a short consultation; then one of them spoke to Ted.

"Young man," he said, "you have what we would call an honest face. We really believe your story, but we have orders from our chief to arrest every stranger we run across who seems the least bit suspicious. We will have to take you to headquarters, and we sincerely hope you can explain affairs to the chief so that he will not deem it necessary to lock you up. We will not put the bracelets on you. We will take your word for it that you will go with us peaceably."

"Entirely satisfactory," was Ted's response, and the journey to the police station commenced.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHIPPED BY EXPRESS.

"Hey, Bill, d'ye hear that noise?"

"Yes, Charlie."

The scene was the interior of a baggage car on a fast train in southern Kansas.

The train was speeding eastward.

The man who had asked the opening question of this chapter was dressed in the uniform of an express agent and the man who had answered the question was his assistant.

They were hard at word checking up their lading bills when they were both suddenly startled by a shuffling noise coming from a large pile of expressed boxes and crates.

"There isn't any live stock billed, is there, Charlie?" asked the man who had been called Bill.

"No."

"Then something is wrong. Some living thing must be responsible for those sounds."

Above the rumble of the trucks and the roar of the wheels of the train, the scraping, shuffling sounds could be plainly heard.

The two expressmen pulled down several boxes and trunks, until they discovered a large trunk which seemed to be the one from which the noises emanated.

As they approached this big trunk they were surprised to hear a faint, human voice calling:

"Help! For God's sake, open this trunk, quick!"

"Some one is in the trunk," exclaimed Charlie. "Get the hatchet; quick!"

Having no other way of opening the trunk, Charlie smashed the lock with a few blows with the head of the hatchet.

As the lid became released, a white-faced, scared-looking young man quickly worked himself out of the trunk.

The side door of the car was open.

The train was still going at great speed. The stranger from the trunk ran quickly toward the open door.

Thinking that the stranger was demented and meant to jump from the train the two expressmen sprang toward him.

But they did not reach the stranger, who came to a halt at the door of the car and threw far from the moving car some object he had held in his hand as he left the trunk.

The object soared high in the air and just before it struck the ground it exploded with a deafening report.

The three men who were looking from the car turned deathly pale as they noted the effect of the explosion. Where the object had landed there was a hole as large as a big cellar in the ground.

The man who had escaped from the trunk now turned to the men who had liberated him. He was mopping from his face great streams of perspiration.

"Just in time!" he exclaimed.

"What was that object you just threw away?" asked Charlie.

"All I know is that it was an infernal machine," was the reply. "It was expected to be the instrument of my death, and I have you two gentlemen to thank for liberating me just in time."

"May I ask your name?"

"Certainly; you are both entitled to some explanations.

I am Ben Tremont, from the Los Animas Ranch, in Texas."

It was, indeed, our friend, Ben Tremont, who had just escaped from a terrible death.

Big Ben had gone through a terrible experience since he had been caught by Sporty Jim in the big costume trunk in the dressing room of the circus.

As Sporty Jim had pushed down the cover of the trunk he had called in a low voice to the woman whom he had left in the adjoining apartment:

"Come here, quickly, Nell."

Ben heard the woman enter the apartment.

"What is it, Jim?" she asked.

"I've got one of Ted Strong's men in this trunk. He was listening to our conversation," answered Jim.

"What are you going to do with him?" asked the woman.

"Can we get along without this trunk? Is there any place we can pack the costumes?"

"There should be room enough for them in the two big boxes," replied the woman.

"Then I'm going to get rid of this fellow for good and all. Got any chloroform?"

"You know I always have some on hand for my toothache," replied Nell.

"Bring it in here and also bring that clockwork machine your uncle gave you."

The woman seemed to hesitate and then Ben heard her exclaim: "You don't mean that infernal machine—the one which can be set to go off at any specified time? You don't want that thing, do you? Uncle gave it to me for a curiosity?"

"Sure thing," was the cool answer from Sporty Jim.

What more was said on the subject Ben did not know, for the man and woman had left the apartment or were talking in lower tones.

While temporarily alone Ben tried his muscles on the lid of the trunk. It was a new trunk and very strongly built. Without a purchase of some kind Ben knew he could not possibly force his way out.

But Ben reflected that he would not be apt to smother in his extraordinary prison, for there were several holes bored in one end of the trunk—the end nearest his head. It would seem that the trunk had been used to carry pets of some kind in at some time.

Ben soon heard the man and the woman again.

He put his eye close to one of the holes in the trunk, but quickly withdrew it. The hole was being blinded by a handkerchief or a piece of white cloth.

A second later Ben's nostrils detected the strong odor of chloroform. He was helpless to fight against the drug. He tried to hold his breath.

But Ben was in the power of his foes. Eventually he succumbed to the penetrating odor. He became unconscious.

How many hours later it was when Ben returned to consciousness, he never knew.

For a long time he seemed to be in a state of half consciousness before he finally came to his full senses and realized his position.

Then, by the jar and the rumble, he knew that he was on a moving train.

Even then for several minutes he made no move to attract attention. His limbs were cramped. There seemed no life in his legs or arms.

Suddenly he was attracted by a ticking noise, like that of a clock.

The noise seemed to come from a corner of the trunk directly under his head.

He listened intently for several moments. He finally became convinced that there was really a clock in the trunk.

Then, all at once, a terrible realization of his danger came upon him. He remembered what had been said by the man and woman concerning an infernal machine.

He now had no doubt but that Sporty Jim had carried out his threat. The villain had planned to do away with Ben Tremont.

His scheme was diabolical.

After chloroforming his enemy, Sporty Jim had opened the trunk, taken out Ben's unconscious form, and, having wound and set the infernal machine and placed it in the trunk, had replaced Ben's body, locked the trunk and had it sent by express to some distant point.

In all probability Sporty Jim had expected the infernal machine to explode before Ben had recovered from the effects of the drug.

The plan was to cause the death of the young rough rider while he was being unconsciously transported toward the destination marked upon the trunk.

When Ben fully realized his perilous position he began kicking as loudly as possible with his feet upon the inside of the trunk.

What passed through the brain of the rough rider in those terrible few minutes could never be recorded.

His was such an ordeal as few men have ever experienced.

He knew not at what fatal moment the mechanism of the infernal machine would cause an explosion.

Ben was nearly crazed by the strain upon his nerves.

Then he heard the welcome sounds of trunks and boxes being moved about. He knew that his kicking upon the trunk had been heard.

But would he be released in time? Every second counted.

Then when the lock of the trunk was broken he lost no time in getting out.

As he left the trunk he glanced at the corner near which his head had been resting. His eye fell upon the

little, wooden box in which rested the infernal machine. It was still ticking.

Without pausing to examine the machine Ted approached the open door of the car and threw the machine, box and all, as far as his strength would permit.

That Ben was not one second too quick in getting rid of the terrible infernal machine has been noted.

Ben told the two expressmen as much of the story as was necessary, and then he asked them:

"Which way is this train traveling, and how far am I from Roben, Kan.?"

"The next station is Ashton, which is about one hundred and thirty miles east of Roben," replied the man, whose name has been given as Charlie.

"Let's look at the trunk and see where I was started for," suggested Ben.

The address on the trunk was Kansas City, Mo.

"You can let the trunk go on to Kansas City, if you wish," said Ben, "but the erstwhile contents will be left at Ashton."

As he spoke the train slowed up at the Ashton depot and Ben, expressing his gratitude, took leave of the two expressmen and left the train.

His first thought was to go to a telegraph office and send a message to the mayor of Roben, requesting that any telegrams arriving there for him be forwarded to Ashton.

He attended to this matter at once, as he fully expected to get a telegram sometime that day or night from Ted Strong.

Then Ben hunted up a hotel, where he arrived just at supper time.

Ben retired early, but he left word with the night clerk of the hotel to waken him at any time during the night should a telegram arrive for him.

No message came during the night and Ben was up early the next morning and was the third or fourth person to enter the breakfast room.

As he entered the door of the dining room he gave a quick exclamation of surprise.

He saw a familiar face at one of the head tables.

CHAPTER IX.

TED MEETS AN OLD FRIEND.

We left Bud Morgan and Ted Strong on the outskirts of a strange city accompanying three burly policemen to the station house.

The policemen had arrested our heroes as questionable characters.

Neither Ted nor Bud had any fear concerning the outcome of their arrest. They knew that later they could easily convince the authorities of their innocence of any suspected crime.

And they accompanied the policemen willingly.

It was a long walk to the station, and when they arrived they found the headquarters in charge of a lieutenant of police.

The police force of this city was not large, and the three principal officers were a chief of police, a captain of police and a lieutenant of police.

The chief of police was usually on duty at headquarters during the daytime, the captain at night, while the lieutenant's duties kept him most of the time on the streets.

But this night, it was learned, the captain was ill and the lieutenant was filling his place.

When Ted and Bud were taken before the lieutenant to tell their story, the officer listened patiently to what Ted had to say, and then replied:

"I have no doubt that the captain, if he were here, would allow you your liberty. Your story seems straight enough. I have heard a great deal and read a great deal about Ted Strong and his company of famous young rough riders. But I do not feel as if I should take the responsibility of letting you go upon your own recognizances without instructions from one or the other of my superior officers."

"I understand how you feel, lieutenant, and cannot blame you," was Ted's reply, "but our business is of great importance. We have urgent work to attend to and cannot well afford to be detained a moment longer than is absolutely necessary. If you will send for your chief of police I will gladly pay for a carriage to be sent for him at his residence."

"It is strictly against the orders of Chief Thompson to waken him at night unless it is a matter of life or death or a big robbery or fire. To waken him for a cause of this kind might mean the loss of my job to me," was the lieutenant's reply.

"Did you say the chief's name is Thompson?" asked Ted, eagerly.

"Yes, his name is James Thompson," was the reply.

"I know him, then," exclaimed Ted, and he quickly described the man, to the lieutenant's evident astonishment.

"Used to know him back East," explained Ted. "Jim was one of our crowd—played with the same ball team as myself two seasons. Say, lieutenant, will you let me take the responsibility of calling him up? Will you let me use your telephone?"

After some hesitation the lieutenant consented to grant the favor asked by the young rough rider, but he evidently trembled for fear of what the consequences might be to himself.

Ted was informed of the chief's number and was soon asking the "hello girl" to call him up.

The bell had to be rung several times before there was an answer, and Ted began to fear the chief would not answer at all, but at last there came a gruff response.

Ted recognized the voice of his old friend.

"Hello, Jim?" called Ted.

"Who is it?"

"Don't you know my voice?"

"No." The answer was short and the chief was apparently nettled.

"I'm Ted Strong. Do you remember the time the Suberbas defeated the Homerunners in a sixteen-inning game for the championship of Lennox County at Summer Vale Park by a score of three to two?"

"Do I? Holy smoke, Ted, how in the world did you come to strike this town?" There was a surprised and, at the same time, a pleased note in Chief Thompson's voice now.

"A friend of mine and myself took a trip in a balloon and we landed in the edge of town a little while ago. Three of your officers arrested us as suspicious characters and we are now at headquarters. Your lieutenant won't let us go without orders from you," replied Ted.

The answer came instantly when Ted had finished:

"You wait for me right where you are. I'll be down within twenty minutes." Without waiting for Ted to answer, the chief rang off.

Chief Thompson was true to his promise. In less than twenty minutes he was seated in his private office with the two rough riders, and they were telling him of their strange adventure in the balloon.

Then, forgetful of the lateness of the hour, the two old friends began telling stories of the past, bringing up many interesting reminiscences.

On and on they talked until they were suddenly interrupted by a loud snore from Bud Morgan. The older rough rider had relaxed in an easy-chair and was now in the land of dreams.

Ted hastily aroused his friend and, a moment later, noted that it was daylight.

As Ted and Bud were about to take their departure, the chief announced that he would accompany them to the nearest hotel and have breakfast with the two.

As they were walking toward the hotel, the chief remarked to Ted: "You must forgive my men for taking you in as they did last night. They were only obeying orders. We have been extra vigilant of late, for there have been many hold ups, several big burglaries and other crimes happening within the last week or ten days, and we have been baffled in our searches for the criminals."

"Don't think, Jim, that I hold any grudge against your men for plainly doing their duty," replied Ted.

As the three men seated themselves at the table in the big dining room of the hotel, they discovered that they were the very first persons in for breakfast.

"I suppose," remarked Ted, "that we ought to send a telegram immediately to Ben, letting him know that we are safe and sound. He will worry about us." As Ted spoke he beckoned to a waiter, who soon supplied him with a telegraph blank.

Ted was just about to write his message to Ben, when, glancing toward the door, he saw something that greatly astonished him.

Then he rose from the table with extended hand.

His hearty greeting was to Ben Tremont.

By a strange coincidence the three rough riders had met in the same town.

CHAPTER X.

A CLEW ESTABLISHED.

After Ben had been introduced to Jim Thompson, explanations were in order.

Ben first told of his terrible experience in the trunk and of his almost miraculous escape, and then Ted told of the adventures Bud Morgan and himself had had in the balloon and with the policemen.

Chief Thompson was seemingly greatly interested in both of the stories, but he made no comment until each had finished and the four had eaten their breakfasts and were seated in comfortable chairs in the hotel office.

Then he said: "Boys, your stories have greatly interested me, particularly what you have said of the little girl who was probably kidnaped. It is possible that you have unwittingly placed a clew in my hands for which my men have hunted in vain for the last week."

The rough riders pricked up their ears in interest.

"Eight days ago," continued the chief, "the Fuller & Zinn Circus showed at Ashton. The circus had a large following of criminals and shady characters, and my police force was never busier than during and since the time that circus was in town. After the show had gone it was evident that some of its followers remained here, for, as I told you before, there continued a long list of hold ups and burglaries.

"The second day after the show left town, an influential and wealthy citizen of the city, Mr. John LaDuke by name, reported the mysterious disappearance of his little daughter, Gertrude. It was at first suspected that the child had been kidnaped and that a ransom would be demanded for her return, but, as no such demand came, it was at last decided that the child had been drowned in the river. Men are still engaged in dragging the river for the body.

"Since hearing your stories, I am of the belief that the child who is in the power of that circus fakir, whom you call Sporty Jim, is no other than little Gertrude LaDuke."

"Have you a picture of the child?" asked Ted.

The chief of police replied to Ted's question by taking from an inner pocket a photograph, wrapped carefully in tissue paper. This he handed to the young rough rider.

Ted needed but one glance at it to convince him that the child in the picture and the little girl whom the ring-

master with the circus had been beating were one and the same.

It was with great satisfaction that Chief Thompson heard Ted's confirmation of his suspicions.

The chief was about to speak again, when Ted interrupted him.

"Chief, I want to ask a favor of you."

"What is it?"

"Tell no person of what we have discovered. Don't let it be known that you have a clew as to the child's whereabouts, unless it be to tell the child's parents. Leave the whole thing to my companions and myself. We have several things to settle with this man, Sporty Jim, and we will follow him and his companions in this kidnaping case to the end of the world rather than allow him to escape punishment."

"Good," was Thompson's reply, as he shook the hand of the young rough rider. "I will agree to your request and I wish you success. But I know you will succeed."

Ted excused himself and started for the telegraph office which was connected with the office of the hotel. There he wrote this telegram and addressed it to Mayor Walter Hardy, of Roben:

"We are safe here. Take care of our horses. When did show move and where to? TED STRONG."

Then Ted rejoined the party.

"I have wired Hardy to ascertain where the show moved to from Roben," he said. "We will prepare to start after the show the moment we get an answer. We have but one thing to attend to here and that is to pack that wreck of a balloon and ship it on to wherever the show may be."

"Don't worry about that," said Thompson. "I will see that that matter is attended to."

Ted, with thanks, accepted the chief's offer; then, at Ted's suggestion, Bud and himself concluded to get a room and take what rest they could before the arrival of an answer to Ted's telegram. Ben now felt no need of rest and he volunteered to watch for the telegram and waken his friends in time to catch the first train they would need to take to pursue the circus.

It was not until just before dinner that the answer came. Ben opened the envelope and read as follows:

"Horses all right. Circus route is Fenton, Morley, Howell. WALTER HARDY."

"We will want to catch them in Morley," said Ben to himself.

Then he hastily consulted a railway time card and found that a train left immediately after the dinner hour.

He aroused his companions and showed them the telegram. They ate an early dinner and, an hour later, were speeding westward in pursuit of the Fuller & Zinn Circus, where they hoped to find little Gertrude LaDuke and her abductors.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CIRCUS IN MORLEY.

It was nearly three o'clock the next morning when the three rough riders, Ted Strong, Ben Tremont and Bud Morgan, arrived in the town of Morley, Colo.

Two hours after their arrival, the long train carrying the Fuller & Zinn Circus from Fenton, Kansas, steamed into the station, and was sidetracked for unloading.

The rough riders had waited at the depot for the arrival of the circus train, and now watched the unloading, hoping to get a glimpse of Sporty Jim leaving the train.

Ted Strong, as the animals were taken from the cars, suddenly remarked to his companions:

"The big elephant, Rodney, is not here."

A passing showman, hearing the remark of the young rough rider, paused a moment.

"Rodney was killed yesterday, sir," said the showman.

"Is that so?" asked Ted, interestedly. "How did it happen?"

"He got away, day before yesterday, at Roben, and was finally recaptured after tearing down the big tent and smashing up the ticket wagon. Then, yesterday, at Fenton, he got away again, killing one of his keepers. He got out of the circus grounds and roamed pretty much all over the town. He killed one horse and severely wounded a man, besides doing all sorts of damage. The elephant seemed to be crazy. They tried to capture him, but couldn't, so he was finally shot dead."

"I suppose it will be a great loss to the proprietors of the circus?" asked Ted.

"I don't know just how much it cost Fuller to make good the damage claims," replied the laborer, as he turned toward his work.

The rough riders remained near the train until it was evident that all the performers had left the cars and had gone to the circus grounds.

They had seen nothing of Sporty Jim, nor of the little girl, who they were certain had been kidnaped.

Then they followed the crowd toward the circus grounds.

The big tent was being erected when they arrived, and the side-show tent was already up, but not yet open for business.

Ted and his friends loitered about the grounds for about an hour, and then went to a hotel for breakfast.

At the same hotel some of the performers of the circus were also having breakfast. The rough riders were seated at the same table at which two or three men and the same number of women were eating.

Ted had just given the waitress his order, and had glanced up again, when he noticed that one of the women at the table was looking searchingly at him.

There was a familiar look about the woman's face, but Ted did not recognize her until she spoke to him.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the woman, "but I believe it is to you that I owe my life."

Then Ted was able to place the woman. She was the performer whom he had saved from the attack of the mad elephant in the big tent when the circus was at Roben.

"Don't mention it," said Ted, gallantly, with a smile; "but was not your ankle broken when you stumbled and fell?"

"I thought it was at first," replied the woman, "but it proved to be only sprained. It is still sore, but I can walk upon it. You are a very brave man, sir. I hope sometime to be able to repay you for your service in thus risking your own life to save me."

Then Ted, at the woman's request, gave his name, so that she might introduce him to her professional friends. Ted, in turn, introduced Ben and Bud.

Then the circus people told the young rough riders about the mad actions of Rodney in Fenton, and how the animal was killed.

"The damage claims were heavy, indeed," concluded one of the performers, "and it has been hinted that the circus has been put on the bum. To-day is our regular pay day, and we have just been considering the question as to the likelihood of our being turned down. The performers have all agreed to 'bunch' the show if our salaries are not forthcoming."

"Do you think it is as bad as that?" asked Ted, in surprise.

"Yes, we do," replied the performer. "The show has been playing in hard luck for over a month. We know it has been running continually in the hole, and it seemed to be a cinch that it must break up before the season ends unless it struck exceptionally good business. These damage claims just came at the right time, we think, to bankrupt the owners."

Just then another of the performers broke into the conversation, with a question to Ted:

"Are you not the young man who was carried away in the balloon at Roben when Sporty Jim cut the cable?"

"Yes," replied Ted; and then he told the circus people of the perilous ride Bud Morgan and himself had had.

"Sporty Jim had it in for you for breaking up his graft game in the side show, didn't he?" asked one of the performers.

"I think so," was Ted's reply. Ted thought it best to say nothing regarding the kidnaped child.

"Well, you won't be bothered with Sporty Jim in this town," remarked another of the performers.

"No? Why not?" asked Ted.

"Because Jim and his wife, Nell, and their adopted daughter have left the show!" was the startling reply.

"When did they leave?" asked Ted.

"The night the show left Roben."

"Where did they go?" was Ted's next question.

"I don't know," replied the man who had spoken. Ted glanced from one to another performer, in the hope that some one of them might be able to answer the question.

A few minutes later, the circus people began leaving the table. They had been eating longer than the rough rider's, and had finished their breakfast sooner.

But, as the performers left, the woman whose life Ted had saved lingered behind her companions.

As they walked away from her, she approached the side of Ted Strong, and said:

"You are worried because you found that Sporty Jim and his wife have left the circus. You came here purposely to see him. You want revenge. Perhaps I can help you locate him."

Ted looked up in surprise.

"If you can help me find that villain and his wife, you will be well repaid," replied Ted.

"The ringmaster of the circus knows where they are. He is in love with me, and I have had to accept his disagreeable attentions for the reason that he has authority over all the performers. Perhaps I can coax the secret out of him. I will try; but, if I am successful, I can accept no reward. You saved my life. It is my duty to do what I can for you. Besides, I cordially hate Sporty Jim and his cruel wife. I would enjoy seeing him properly punished. Meet me at the circus grounds right after the parade."

Thus speaking, the woman turned and walked rapidly away, before Ted had time to reply to what she had said.

CHAPTER XII.

BEN GETS REVENGE.

"Let's attach the show property!"

"That's the talk!"

"We can't afford to be left in this part of the world dead broke!"

These and other angry expressions greeted the ears of the three rough riders as they entered the hotel office from the dining room.

The office was filled with circus performers of both sexes, and they had just been informed by the senior proprietor of the circus, Frank Fuller, that he would be unable to pay their salaries that day. The professional people were given no hope that their back month's salaries would ever be paid. They knew that the circus was deeply in debt.

It was a crisis that they had vaguely anticipated for some time, but that made it none the less hard to bear.

Some of the performers were furious; others were hysterical.

All were greatly excited.

Of course, none of the rough riders were personally interested in the matter, but they paused out of curiosity to see what plan the performers would adopt.

It was finally decided to get out an attachment to cover their salaries.

Soon it became known all over the town that the circus was stranded.

It was decided to give the usual performances, however, that day, and a representative of the performers would be selected to take charge of the ticket wagon. The receipts would be turned over to the performers to apply on salaries.

This was all legally arranged before noon.

As Ted was about to start toward the show grounds, he was surprised upon being accosted by one of the performers whom he had met at breakfast.

"Mr. Strong," said the man, "we performers have held a meeting, and I have been delegated to ask you to look after the ticket receipts for the performers this afternoon and to-night. You have a great reputation for honesty and fair dealing. We have attached to-day's receipts for our salaries, and are willing that you should take charge of things for us. We will allow you a fair commission for your services."

"That is something quite out of my line," replied Ted, with a smile.

"We know you can do the work and do it right. There is no other person we know whom we are willing to trust. I hope you will not disappoint us," urged the man.

Ted thought the matter over seriously for a few moments, and then he said:

"If you will make out the salary list of all that is coming to each performer, get it O. K.'d by Fuller, and hand it to me so that everything will be straight and plain, I will try and attend to your interests in the matter."

"I'll have the list for you within an hour," replied the man, as he turned to hurry away.

Ted went immediately to the circus grounds. The parade had just returned from its trip over the town.

With Bud and Ben, Ted strolled about the grounds for a short time before he found the woman performer who had promised to try and procure information as to where Sporty Jim had gone.

As the woman approached, Ted saw by the expression on her face that she had not yet been successful.

"I have not yet had any opportunity to talk with Whaley," she said.

"Whaley is the ringmaster?" asked Ted.

"Yes," was the reply. Then the woman continued: "I understand that you have promised to look after our interests in regard to to-day's ticket receipts?"

"I have promised to do so conditionally," replied Ted.

"Then I will promise you to get you the desired information before the day is over," said the woman, hurrying away.

As Ted lost sight of the woman in the crowd, he turned to make some remark to his companions, but, at that moment, he saw Ben Tremont stretch out his arm and seize the collar of a passing circus hand.

Ben nearly jerked the young man whom he had seized off his feet.

"I've got you at last!" Ben exclaimed.

"What do yer want?" asked the surprised young man.

"You have forgotten the little affair that happened the day before yesterday, have you?" asked Ben. "You are the man who hit me in the face when I made you give up that revolver!"

"I guess yer has made a mistake. You got the wrong man. Mebby it was my brother. I got a twin brother with the show!" exclaimed the man, in affright.

But Ben was eying the burly youth intently. He knew the young fellow was lying. He had made no mistake in his man. This was certainly the fellow Ben had chased into the dressing tent of the circus at Roben.

"Since I last saw you," continued Ben, "I have learned that my friend lost two revolvers instead of the one I made you return. Now, I want you to hand over the other one, after which I am going to give you a sound thrashing in return for that smash you gave me in the face!"

While Ben talked, the young man trembled in fear.

"I ain't got no revolver! You has made a mistake!" he exclaimed.

With a twist of his wrist, Ben turned the fellow quickly around.

Of course, Ben had no way of being certain that the fellow had found both of Ted's revolvers. He only suspected that he had. But he intended to make sure.

As he whirled the youth about with one hand, he felt in the man's hip pockets with the other.

Ben's suspicions had been correct.

Protruding from the man's pocket was the grip of Ted's other revolver. Ben pulled the weapon out and handed it to the young rough rider.

"Young man," said Ben, as he jerked the youth around to his former position, "you are a bad, bad boy. You not only lie, but you also steal. You must be punished."

Although the youth was fully as large as Ben himself, and apparently strong and well muscled, he seemed as clay in Ben's hands.

That the young man was at heart a veritable coward was plainly seen, for his teeth chattered in his affright.

Ben had not the heart to double up his fist and pommel the man.

But he itched for revenge. He seemed to still feel the tingling sensation of the blow on his cheek, delivered two days previous by the young showman.

As Ben spoke to the youth, he backed up against a large stone at the edge of the circus grounds.

Then, still pulling the youth along with him, Ben sat upon the stone, and laid the young showman across his knees, for all the world as if he was a big, overgrown

schoolboy, and was about to receive one of those old-fashioned spankings from his teacher.

The showman now struggled with all his might.

The humiliating position in which he found himself was greater punishment than a sound thrashing would have been.

The fracas had attracted a crowd quickly, and Ben's novel method of whipping the man caused a great deal of merriment.

Although the youth struggled as hard as he could, Ben seemed to hold him right where he wanted him with little apparent effort.

Ben concluded his punishment of the youth by picking up a small slab of wood from the ground, flat on one side, and with this paddle he gave the youth a sound spanking where it would do the most good.

Finally, Ben threw the enraged showman from his lap, and commanded: "Now, you get away from here just as fast as you know how! The next time you tell me a lie I will spank you harder than I have this time!"

The discomfited showman jumped to his feet, threw an angry glance at Ben, and then hurried away into the crowd, followed by the taunts and jeers of the spectators.

Shortly after Ben's experience with the young showman, Ted was accosted by the performer who had asked the young rough rider to look after the ticket sales that day in the interests of the performers, who had procured an attachment for back salaries.

"I have the list you required," said the man, thrusting into Ted's hands a large sheet of paper, "and have attended to all arrangements."

Ted ascertained that his appointment as the representative of the performers had been ratified by the proper authorities. His duties would be to look after the ticket receipts and make the settlement at the end of the evening performance with the sheriff, who was to take full charge of the ticket wagon and sell the tickets.

It was learned that the side show and other side attractions had no connection with the big show, except to travel with it. They were not owned by Fuller & Zinn, proprietors of the circus and menagerie.

When Ted had learned that everything was all straight and aboveboard, he went to dinner, so as to return before the ticket wagon was opened for business.

It had been agreed that Ted should figure up the accounts with the sheriff after the ticket selling for the evening performance had ended, and that he should receive what money was coming to the performers, and give the sheriff a receipt for it. Ted was then to take the money to the hotel and divide it among the performers whose names were upon the list handed to him.

Ted was on hand when the tickets began selling, and all the afternoon he kept steadily at his work in the ticket wagon.

It was between nine and ten o'clock that night when the sheriff and Ted came to a settlement.

There had not been quite enough money taken in for the two performances to satisfy the claims of the performers. Ted at last started toward the hotel, with a trifle over eighteen hundred dollars in a little canvas bag.

The circus tents were pitched in the outskirts of the town.

The evening performance was not yet quite out, and the streets were nearly deserted. Bud and Ben had gone in to see the circus, so Ted was alone.

But the young rough rider had little thought of danger.

He was walking rapidly along a side street, which he knew intersected with the street which would take him directly toward the hotel, when he was suddenly accosted by two men.

They had stepped from the shadows of a brick building just in front of him, and Ted saw that they were both holding revolvers toward him.

"Halt, young man! We will relieve you of that roll of money!"

The words of the man had been spoken in a determined tone.

Had the money been his own, perhaps Ted would have handed it over without resistance, relying upon his ability to eventually get it back; but the money belonged to the circus performers. Ted felt it his duty to fight for it.

He was about to make a bold rush upon his foes, when a third member of the hold-up party, whom Ted had passed unseen, tiptoed up behind the rough rider and felled him to the ground with a stuffed "billy."

Ted dropped unconscious to the ground, but, before consciousness had left him, he heard one of his enemies exclaim:

"Good work, Whaley!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TED PAYS OFF THE PERFORMERS.

"My God, I'm too late!"

It was a woman who had thus exclaimed. She was the woman performer who had promised Ted to try and find out from Whaley, the ringmaster, information regarding where Sporty Jim and his wife, Nell, had taken the kidnaped child.

As she uttered the exclamation, the woman was bending over the inanimate form of the young rough rider, Ted Strong.

It was but a few minutes after Ted had been attacked in the dark by the three men and had been knocked out.

Even as the woman spoke, two men appeared from the darkness. The woman, hearing the approaching footsteps, started up in fear, but the next moment she sprang forward to meet the men.

They were Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont, and the woman had recognized them.

As she hurried toward them, Ben Tremont asked:

"Who are you?"

"Lulu Vincent, the circus performer," was the answer. Ben drew closer, and then recognized the woman. She led them to the side of the fallen young rough rider.

"You found him here?" asked Ben.

"Yes—just now," replied Lulu; "and I have every reason to believe that he has been robbed of all the money belonging to the circus performers."

Then the woman told a strange story.

After her performance in the circus she had heard Whaley and two other circus men discussing a plan for holding up Ted Strong on his way from the circus grounds to the hotel with the money.

She had not been in a position to hear all of the conversation, but had heard enough to know they had decided to carry out their plot.

She hastily changed her performing costume for her street clothes, and hurried toward the ticket wagon to warn Ted.

But she found that Ted had just left with the money.

She hurried along after him, hoping to overtake him before he was held up, but had not arrived in time. She had stumbled over his body as he lay stretched out on the sidewalk.

She had ascertained that he was not dead just before the others came up.

The men who had held up the young rough rider had taken his money and disappeared.

"Well, it might have been much worse," said Ben. "I am glad Ted was not killed. At any rate, we know one of the men who took part in the robbery, and may eventually get track of him, and get the money back."

"I think I can aid you in finding Whaley," announced the woman.

Neither Ben nor Bud replied at the moment, for Ted was showing signs of returning consciousness.

When Ted finally did open his eyes, and recognized his friends, his first words were: "I have been robbed! Whaley, the ringmaster, and two other men assaulted me. We must catch them; but, first, I want to go to the hotel and square things with the circus performers who trusted me."

It was not many minutes before Ted was able to start for the hotel, accompanied by his friends.

Arriving at the hotel, Ted turned and spoke to his companions before entering the building:

"Do not say a word about my being held up and robbed. I will square accounts with the performers out of my own pocket, and they need never know. It will be better to keep the matter secret for a time."

"But you have no money, have you?" asked Ben.

"How much have you?" Ted asked, in return.

"I have about eight hundred dollars in the safe in the hotel," replied Ben.

Ben had always been a cautious man, and, although he often carried large sums of money with him, he always put it in some safe place, when possible, rather than keep it in his pockets.

On their trip to Kansas, the young rough riders had taken considerable money in cash with them, as they expected to make some large investments in cattle. They had bought no cattle, however, and still had the money with them. Ted, to the surprise of Ben and Bud, now announced that he had over one thousand dollars in the hotel safe.

It was an unusual thing for Ted to place whatever sum of money he might have about his person in a hotel safe. He relied upon his ability to look out for himself.

He could hardly tell, himself, why, on this particular occasion, he had left his money at the hotel, but it was very fortunate for him that he had done so.

Bud Morgan also had quite a considerable sum of money, which he offered to turn over to Ted, but Ted declined the loan, as, with Ben's roll, he had more than enough to make up what belonged to the circus performers.

Entering the hotel, they found most of the performers waiting to get their shares of the day's receipts, but a few had not yet arrived from the circus grounds.

Ted asked all present who had money coming to retire to one of the hotel parlors, saying that he would presently join them there.

Then Ted and Ben got their money from the hotel safe, and went to the parlor to pay off the performers.

It required some time to straighten out the pay roll to determine what each performer had coming, as the receipts had not been sufficient to pay them off in full. Each person was to get about ninety-seven per cent. of what he or she was credited for on the sheet.

By the time all the accounts had been figured up, the last of the performers had arrived, and in a few minutes all had been paid.

Then the performer who had first solicited Ted's services made a short speech, and made a motion that each performer should contribute from two to five dollars toward a purse to pay Ted for his services.

The performers were all anxious to contribute to such a fund, but Ted flatly refused to take any money. He said it had been a pleasure for him to assist them, and that he would receive no pay for his services.

"I know that getting let down and thrown out of work right in the middle of the season is a hard blow for most of you people," said Ted. "Many of you will now be out of work until another season, and you need your money a great deal more than I need it. I am sorry that you have not been paid in full. I thank you for your generous offering, but I cannot accept it."

His short speech was greeted with rousing cheers.

As soon as the performers had left the parlor, Ted was approached by the woman, Lulu Vincent, who said:

"I think I can help you find Claude Whaley."

"I intended to ask you, as soon as I had time, if you had been successful in finding where Sporty Jim and his wife had gone," said Ted, turning toward the woman.

"Well, I found that out, and more, too. I'll tell you all I learned, and then you will know best how to proceed," said Lulu.

"All right; go ahead," replied Ted, seating himself in a chair, and bidding the woman to do the same. Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont were still in the room, and they also drew chairs up close to Ted and the woman, and listened to what she had to tell.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT LULU VINCENT LEARNED.

Lulu Vincent's story was an interesting one, and the rough riders did not interrupt her during her narrative.

As the three men gathered close around her, she began, addressing her remarks, for the most part, directly to Ted:

"When I first promised to learn from Claude Whaley, the ringmaster, where Sporty Jim and his wife had gone after leaving the circus, I imagined the task would be an easy one, but I did not imagine it would be so easy as it really turned out to be.

"As I told you just after breakfast, I relied upon the fact that Whaley professed to be in love with me to pave the way for getting the desired information.

"Well, a short time after the parade, I looked Whaley up. He had just received a letter, and was sitting in his apartment of the dressing room looking it over. Whaley cannot read, and when I saw the letter in his hand, I expected him to ask me to read it to him, as he had done on various other occasions. But he sat with the letter in his hand for a long time, evidently thinking deeply.

"All the time that he was thinking, he was looking directly at me, but with a far-away expression. I waited for him to say something.

"At last he got up and came over to my side. I had never really professed to love Whaley, and had never allowed him to think that I did, but I had permitted him to talk love to me, and, to save my position with the circus, had allowed him to entertain a hope that some time I would marry him.

"When he approached me to-day, I allowed him to put his arm around me, something I had never permited him to do before. I wished to encourage him, for I was bound to get the desired information, which I knew he alone could furnish.

"Then he began making love to me, and, without compromising myself by actually promising to marry him, I finally made him feel that I was really madly in love with him. Then, as I had hoped, he began to get confidential. I finally asked him, point-blank, where Jim and Nell had gone.

"He hesitated just an instant before replying, and then he said: 'Here is a letter from Jim. You may read it to me, and then I will dictate an answer for you to write. Everything should be plain between you and I if you are to become my wife.'

"I took the letter and opened it, without comment. The contents of the letter furnished just the information you want, and I managed to keep possession of the letter to show it to you."

At this point in the story, Lulu paused, and from her waist pulled out the letter and handed it to Ted to read.

Ted opened the letter, and, after glancing at it, exclaimed:

"Why, this letter seems to have been written in a woman's hand!"

"Yes," replied Lulu; "it was evidently written by Nell for Jim; but, you see, it has his signature."

Ted glanced at the bottom of the last page, and saw that Lulu was right. Then he spread out the pages, drew closer to the light, and read the letter aloud, but in a low voice, to Ben and Bud. It read as follows:

"FRIEND AND PAL: Nell and I are on our way with the kid to my uncle's at Garner, Nebraska. We were afraid to stay with the circus after sending that last rough rider cuss to his death in the trunk. Have got to give up making a child wonder performer out of the kid, but have a plan to get hold of good money through her. Don't think we are breaking our agreement to 'whack up' profits with you. Going to make her father pay a good, fat ransom.

"Say, Whaley, the show won't last long. It's bound to go up before the season is half finished. Why don't you follow us? I'll guarantee uncle will give us a good time, and you can help steer this ransom proposition through. We ought to get enough so we won't need to work for several seasons. To get to Garner, take the train to Albion, Boone County, and then take stage from there. Ask for Bump Wilkins' place. He's my uncle. Good luck.

"JIM POPP."

When Ted had finished, he looked up at Lulu, with a fascinating smile, and said: "You have done nobly, Miss Vincent. This letter puts us right on a warm trail. Is there any more to the story?"

"Yes," replied Lulu.

"Did you answer this letter for Whaley?"

"No," was the answer. "Whaley decided later that it wouldn't be necessary. He decided to bunch the circus and join Sporty Jim. That was after it had been definitely announced by the management that the circus was hopelessly stranded, that all the people would be let go, and all dates for the season canceled."

"And you think that Whaley will make his way as quickly as possible to Garner?" asked Ted.

"I am certain of it," was Lulu's reply, "for Whaley told me, late in the afternoon, that he intended to disappear

this evening, and would start immediately for Nebraska. He asked me to join him in Omaha one month from today. He said he would then have a good roll of money. He took it for granted I would join him then for the purpose of becoming his wife. But he did not tell me of his plan to hold you up and rob you. I do not know whether he had conceived that idea at that time or not."

Lulu had apparently told her story. She had given the rough riders some valuable information.

Ted thought silently for a few moments, and then he addressed the woman:

"What do you expect to do now, Miss Vincent?"

"I have no particular plans," she replied, "except that I will probably go to my mother's, in Ohio, and try to get on with some other show for the rest of the season."

"You have no intention of marrying Claude Whaley?"

"He would be the last man on earth I would wish to marry," replied Lulu.

"Pardon this question," said Ted, "but have you plenty of money to last you until another season, providing you fail to get work for the balance of this season?"

The woman blushed, and hesitated, but finally answered: "To tell the truth, I have but very little money saved. My mother is an invalid, and it has cost me a great deal to support her."

"Give me your address in Ohio," said Ted.

The woman complied with the request, and then Ted said:

"Your services in this case have been very valuable, whether we succeed in getting the child or not, and I am going to see that you are well paid."

"But——" began Lulu.

"Oh, you needn't worry," Ted interrupted, "for the money will not come out of my pocket. I imagine the parents of the child will greatly appreciate the work you have done.

"Now, it is getting late," continued Ted, "and we will bid you farewell, with best wishes for your future. There is a train going north at midnight, and we will probably not see you again."

CHAPTER XV.

BUMP WILKINS' PLACE.

The three rough riders found that they had to change trains and railways several times in order to get from Morley, Colorado, to Albion, Nebraska, and it was the second afternoon after they left the former town that they arrived at their destination.

Although late in the day, Ted was resolved to lose no time in starting for Garner. After a few inquiries, it was learned that Garner was a small town in the center of a large ranching district, and that it was located about fifteen miles north of Albion, in what was known as the Beaver Creek Valley.

There would be no stage going to Garner until after dinner the next day.

Ted decided to hire three saddle horses for the trip, but they were somewhat delayed in getting the horses.

They did not, therefore, start from Albion until after supper.

But the road was a straight one, and easily followed. The traveling was good underfoot, and by ten o'clock the moon had risen. At that time they judged that they were within a couple of miles of the town.

Meeting a horseman upon the road, who was riding toward Albion, Ted stopped the man and asked several questions.

"How far is it to Garner?"

"About a mile and a half," answered the man.

"Can you tell me where to look for Bump Wilkins' place?"

"Sure!" replied the stranger; "but anyone can tell you when you get to Garner. It's the biggest saloon in the town. You can't miss it. Going to try your luck?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ted.

"Why, shuffle the cards or hit the roulette," answered the stranger.

"Wilkins' place is a gambling joint, then?"

"You bet; and nothing is on the square. Say, if you are good with the cards, I'd like to have you do up a cuss who just lately arrived. He's taking everybody's money. Took a hundred from me this afternoon. I'd like to see some one clean him out."

"Who is he?"

"Durned if I know, but he brought a woman and a little girl there with him. It's said he is Wilkins' nephew."

Ted could hardly keep from shouting. Then, to make sure he had made no mistake, he described Sporty Jim to the stranger.

"That's him! That's the fellow! You seem to have seen him before."

"I have," replied Ted; "and I'm headed for Bump Wilkins' place for the express purpose of cleaning that fellow out!"

"You are?" exclaimed the stranger, excitedly. "Can you do it?"

"I certainly can," returned Ted.

"I'd give fifty dollars to see you turn the trick!" said the stranger.

"Nothing easier," returned Ted; "and it won't cost you fifty, either."

"Say, stranger, I'm going back with you, if you don't object?"

"You are perfectly welcome," replied Ted.

The stranger had made exactly the proposition which Ted had hoped to lead him to make.

A plan had entered the mind of the young rough rider when he commenced talking with the stranger, a plan whereby he hoped to get into conversation with Sporty Jim without being recognized. He knew that his khaki suit would give him away instantly. To carry out his plan, he must have a change of costume.

As they rode along toward Garner, after being joined by the stranger, Ted urged his horse close to the side of the new member of the party, and said:

"If you want to see me clean out Sporty Jim, you will have to help me in one detail."

"How's that?"

"I cleaned out the man once before, quite recently. He knows I can do it, and won't give me another chance at him if he recognizes me. I want a disguise of some kind. You and I are about the same size. Can you fix me up with a suit of old clothes?"

"You just bet I can, stranger!" replied the man; "and I can fix you with a false mustache, too. I've got a dandy, that I bought down to Denver a few months ago to fool my wife with. We'll go right to my shanty, on this side of town, and fit you out before we go down to Wilkins' place."

"Good for you!" replied Ted. "I'll pay you well for this assistance, if we succeed in fooling our man."

Of course, Ben Tremont and Bud Morgan had heard Ted's conversation with the stranger, and they had "tumbled" immediately to the plan of the young rough rider. They were elated with the scheme, but wondered what rôle Ted expected them to play.

Ted explained what he expected of them later.

In a short time they arrived at the shanty of the stranger, and twenty minutes later Ted's best friend would not have known him. The mustache completely changed the looks of his face, and his clothes fit him as if they had been made for him. But they were old and soiled.

"Now for the big saloon and gambling joint," said Ted

Arriving near Wilkins' place, Ted called a short halt. He instructed Bud and Ben to keep within hearing distance of the gambling den, but not to enter unless he fired three quick shots with his revolver.

Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont took a position behind some sheds in the rear of the saloon, and were delighted to find that from where they stood they could see into the saloon through an open window in the rear.

As Ted entered the place with the stranger, he saw that about a dozen men were seated at three tables playing draw poker.

The joint consisted of only one large room. The bar was at one side of the room and the card tables and other gambling paraphernalia were distributed about the rest of the floor space.

Ted quickly spotted both Sporty Jim and Claude Whaley at one of the card tables. They were playing draw poker with two other men.

Followed by his companion, Ted took up a position near the table, and stood for several moments watching the play.

He was quick to note that Popp and Whaley were secretly playing a partner game, and that, on the deal of either, the other invariably held a winning hand.

The men playing with Whaley and Sporty Jim had evidently been heavy losers, and five minutes after Ted had arrived they both withdrew from the game.

As these men arose, Sporty Jim looked up casually toward the newcomers.

"You fellows want to play?" he asked.

Ted and his companion assented. Before they sat down to the table, Ted had a chance to whisper to the stranger: "Bet on every hand you get when I deal; see?"

The stranger understood, and nodded.

Ted was resolved to get back what money had been stolen from him by Whaley, and at the same time make up to the stranger what money he had lost to Sporty Jim.

It proved to be a sensational game right from the start.

CHAPTER XVI.

A QUICK GAME—CONCLUSION.

Ted Strong did not believe in gambling.

It was principle with him to let cards and all games of chance strictly alone.

But on this occasion he felt that he was justified in playing poker against Sporty Jim and Claude Whaley.

He saw a chance to get back the money which Whaley had stolen from him. He figured that Whaley might have divided that money with his two assistants in the hold up, but he saw that Whaley had fully eighteen hundred dollars in front of him, the amount that Ted had lost.

Because Ted had not played poker for money was no sign he did not know how to handle the cards. He could have made a fortune as a gambler, for he knew every trick of the profession, and he was so dexterous that there seemed little chance of his being caught "stacking" the cards.

And Ted knew tricks of his own with cards—tricks he had studied out and invented himself.

In cutting the cards, the deal fell to the stranger with whom Ted had entered the game.

It had been determined that the game should be a fifty-cent ante, with a "ceiling limit," with show-down privileges, the player declaring his financial condition when down to twenty-five dollars.

On the stranger's deal, Ted held a pair of aces. Sporty Jim, who sat at Ted's right, stayed in the game, and "boosted" the ante up to five dollars. Ted stayed, "seeing" the raise.

The other two men dropped out.

Ted's aces were not helped after the draw, and, when Sporty Jim bet ten dollars, Ted threw his hand in the deck.

Ted watched Sporty Jim shuffle and deal the cards. It was the second pot, and the gambler made no attempt to stack the cards.

No one stayed, and the round resulted in a jack pot. It was now Ted's deal.

Ted made a mess of the shuffle, evidently trying to manipulate the cards too fast. Several cards fell on the floor. Seemingly quite nervous Ted permitted Jim to cut the cards, and then slowly dealt the

Whaley had watched Ted's shuffle with an eagle eye. He was certain that Ted had shuffled and dealt the cards honestly and fairly.

But when he looked at his hand he found that he held four kings.

Ted had given his stranger partner an entirely worthless hand, and the man was forced to lay down his cards when Whaley opened the pot for twenty dollars.

Sporty Jim stayed for the twenty dollars when he found that his hand consisted of three jacks.

Ted also stayed.

Whaley naturally drew one card, and Sporty Jim took two. Ted drew one, also.

Of course, Whaley's hand could not have been helped, but Sporty Jim found that he had drawn the fourth jack.

Whaley opened the betting with fifty dollars, which was raised to one hundred dollars by Sporty Jim.

Ted merely called Sporty Jim's bet, knowing that Whaley would undoubtedly make another raise.

Whaley made the bet two hundred.

As he was playing partners with Whaley, Sporty Jim now merely called that raise, and it was up to Ted to do the boosting.

As Ted had called Sporty Jim's first raise, both gamblers were now astonished when Ted raised the bet to five hundred dollars.

Whaley weakened when he saw the raise. He merely placed money enough in the pot to call Ted's raise.

It was now up to Sporty Jim.

The ex-fakir hesitated. He pondered a long time. He reasoned that his own hand must be better than the hand of Whaley. He had an idea that Ted was bluffing. Ted had played his hand so erratically that he had Sporty Jim guessing.

Finally Sporty Jim counted out a roll of bills and laid them in the pot.

As he did so, he winked covertly at Whaley. It was a signal between the two that Sporty Jim held four of a kind.

Ted counted the money which Sporty Jim had placed in the pot.

"You have altogether one thousand dollars in the pot?" he asked of Sporty Jim.

"Yes."

"You have raised me five hundred?"

Sporty Jim nodded.

Ted figured a moment. He did not wish to win more than the amount stolen from him by Whaley.

If he called the bet, and Whaley did the same, Ted figured he would be exactly two thousand dollars winner. Perhaps that was as near as he could come to the exact amount. He merely called the bet.

Now there was a problem for Whaley to figure out. He knew that Sporty Jim held fours. He had fours him-

self, and they were kings. He doubted if Sporty Jim's fours were as large as his own.

For safety, it was his play to call the bet, and he did so.

The hands were laid face up on the table.

Ted Strong held a straight heart flush—ten, nine, eight, seven and six. He had the winning hand.

"You dealt the cards yourself! You cheated!"

Sporty Jim had uttered the exclamation as Ted was drawing in the pot and shoving the money into his pockets.

As he spoke, Sporty Jim jumped to his feet, and a revolver gleamed in his hand. It was plainly his intention to either shoot the young rough rider or try to hold him up for the purpose of getting the money back.

He had evidently relied upon Whaley to stand back of him, and he was not disappointed. Whaley also sprang up, with a revolver in view.

But Ted's nerve seemed to rattle the men. They did not bring their revolvers to a level quickly.

Ted made no reach toward his weapon. He coolly stowed the money carefully away in his pockets, and then, with a quick move, pulled off his false mustache and his hat.

Ted's brown curls, now released, fell about his shoulders.

He sat, suddenly revealed, before his two enemies.

Each man gave a cry of terror as they recognized the face of Ted Strong.

They realized that he had played a cunning trick upon them.

Sporty Jim was the first to partially recover from the shock.

He lifted his revolver, with a quick motion, leveled it straight at Ted's head, and was about to pull the trigger.

But at that moment a cool, ringing voice came floating through the window at the rear of the room:

"Never mind no signal, Ted! We're on ther spot!"

It was Bud Morgan who spoke, and his words had hardly passed his lips when Bud fired his revolver.

The bullet landed in Sporty Jim's wrist, and the revolver held by the gambler was dropped to the ground without being discharged.

At the same moment, Ben Tremont sprang into the room, and had seized Whaley in his powerful grasp.

Before the ex-ringmaster knew what was going on, he was lying upon the floor, securely bound.

As Bud Morgan had fired, Ted had sprung toward Sporty Jim, and in a minute had floored and bound his man.

Just as Ted raised up from tying Sporty Jim's feet, a door at one side opened, and a woman and little girl appeared in the room. They had evidently been attracted by the noise of Bud's shot, and had run down from an apartment of some sort above the gambling room.

Ted saw the woman as soon as she had entered the room, and he sprang quickly toward her. He had recognized her as Jim's wife, Nell. The little girl was the kidnaped daughter of John LaDuke, of Ashton.

Ted worked fast, and soon secured the woman. He knew that in a very short time he would have to account with the seven or eight spectators in the room.

As quickly as he had his prisoners secured, Ted faced the spectators, and in a few words told them why he had thus bound the three prisoners. When the men learned that the little girl had been kidnaped by Sporty Jim and Claude Whaley, they offered no opposition to Ted's procedure.

Sporty Jim and Whaley had won money from almost every man in the room, and they had succeeded in making themselves heartily disliked in the community. Not a few of the spectators were delighted to see them taken away.

Before leaving the town, Ted secured his own clothes, and delighted the stranger who had loaned the disguise by thrusting two one-hundred-dollar bills in his hand.

The two men and the woman were taken to Albion and placed in the hands of the proper authorities until Chief of Police James Thompson arrived personally to take them back to Ashton for trial.

Thompson was accompanied by John LaDuke, who made the journey to get his daughter.

The three rough riders were generously compensated for their troubles in rescuing the child, and Ted had the saitsfaction of seeing LaDuke send a money order for a large amount, payable to Miss Lulu Vincent, at her home town in Ohio.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 62, of the YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS WEEKLY will contain a thrilling story, entitled "Ted Strong's Nebraska Ranch; or, The Fracas at Fullerton." It tells of how a riot, started on election day in a Nebraska town, was quelled, without loss of life, by the cool courage of the young rough rider. It also tells of how Ted Strong, in a very mysterious manner, became the owner of a prosperous ranch, and how he disposed of it. Don't miss it. Out next week.

YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS WEEKLY

13—Ted Strong's Railway Trip; or, An Unsolved Mystery.
14—Ted Strong's Mission; or, Taming a Tenderfoot.
15—Ted Strong's Might; or, The Cross Against the Sword.
16—Ted Strong's Puzzle; or, The Golden Mesa.
17—Ted Strong in the Chaparral; or, The Hunt at Las Animas.
18—Ted Strong's Forethought; or, King of the Mesa.
19—Ted Strong in the Land of Little Rain; or, Bud Morgan's Vengeance.
20—Ted Strong's Water Sign; or, In Shoshone Land.
21—Ted Strong's Steadiness; or, The Cattle Rustlers of Ceriso.
22—Ted Strong's Land Boom; or, The Rush for a Homestead.
23—Ted Strong's Indian Trap; or, Matching Craft with Craft.
24—Ted Strong's Signal; or, Racing with Death.
25—Ted Strong's Stamp Mill; or, The Woman in Black.
26—Ted Strong's Recruit; or, A Hidden Foe.
27—Ted Strong's Discovery; or, The Rival Miners.
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The young rough rider's aerial voyage, or, The stranded circus

Edward C. Taylor

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